

SOCCER



360

GERRARD
LEGACY

CHELSEA
LEAD THE WAY
+ FAB-REGAS

REAL MADRID
TACTICS
+ GOLDEN RONALDO

INTER
GERMAN NEW BOYS

BAGGIO
SIMPLY DEVINE



ONE ON ONE
NEYMAR
XAVI

GIOVINCO
FROM
JUVE TO
TFC

TFC FIXTURES POSTER!!

2015 MLS KICK OFF

STAR MEN • COACHES • LEGENDS • NUMBERS • FIXTURES • HISTORY



CANADA **USA**
WOMEN'S RIVALRY



TOP 10 TRANSFERS





MARIO BALOTELLI, STRIKER
BLASTS THE BALL AND DOMINATES THE HEADLINES IN THE ALL NEW *evoPOWER* 1.2.



KICK

BOOM

FOREVER FASTER PUMA 

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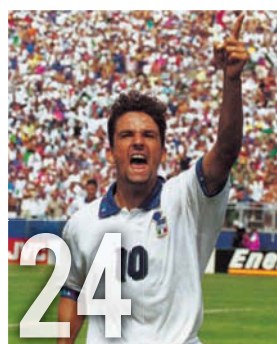
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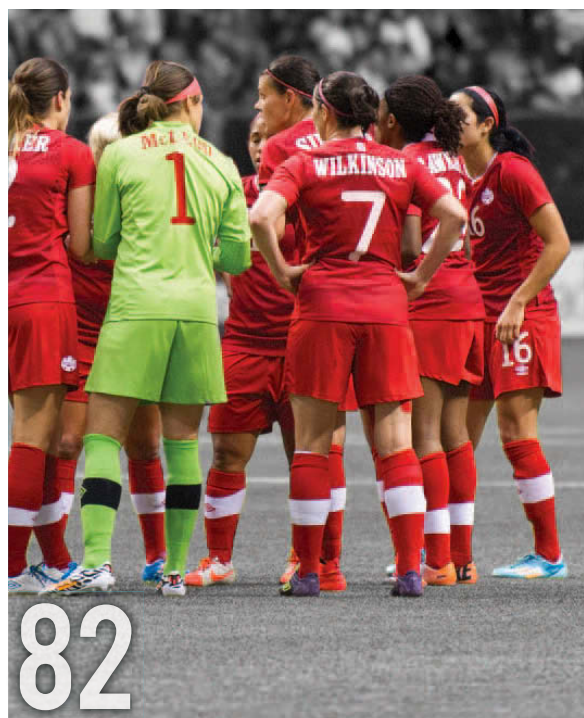
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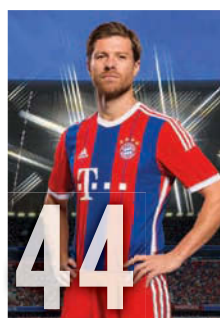
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WELCOME

Europe is entering the final third of its 2014/2015 season with Manchester City and Chelsea in a heated battle at the top of the Premier League table. The Blues hold a slight advantage and hope new signing Juan Cuadrado keeps it that way. City fans will be hoping for another big finish and know New York bound midfielder Frank Lampard and the rest of Manuel Pellegrini's men will be fighting to the finish. Juventus, Bayern Munich, Real Madrid will all keep an eye on the table but have their hopes set on the Champions League with their domestic prospects in good form. At home, Major League Soccer is set to kick off its 20th season and is already buzzing with anticipation. Lampard and his England teammate Steven Gerrard will soon head off for a new adventure in the United States with New York and Los Angeles respectively. They'll be joined by David Villa, Kaká and Sebastian Giovinco, as MLS welcomes its biggest collection of stars to date. It all sets up for an exciting final stretch in Europe and with the first game of the 2015 MLS season just underway, we are gearing up for some fun times ahead for soccer fans on both sides of the Atlantic.



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2015 Top Ten Transfers

January is usually a quiet month for player movement, with the high price of quality players being compounded by the difficulty in getting them settled in time to make an immediate impact. Outside of the summer break, though, January is the only chance most European clubs have to make any changes, and this year saw some big moves - particularly by clubs in the Premier League looking to make a splash in the title run-in. Here's a look at our top 10 to kick off the issue.



1

LUCAS SILVA

Cruzeiro starlet Lucas Silva moved to Real Madrid from Brazil for an undisclosed fee, providing cover at defensive midfield for Los Merengues' star-studded lineup. Lucas may find starting places difficult to come by at the Bernabeu,

but the 22-year-old comes highly rated and is expected to break his way in the first team over the coming seasons.



2

JERMAIN DEFOE & JOZY ALTIDORE

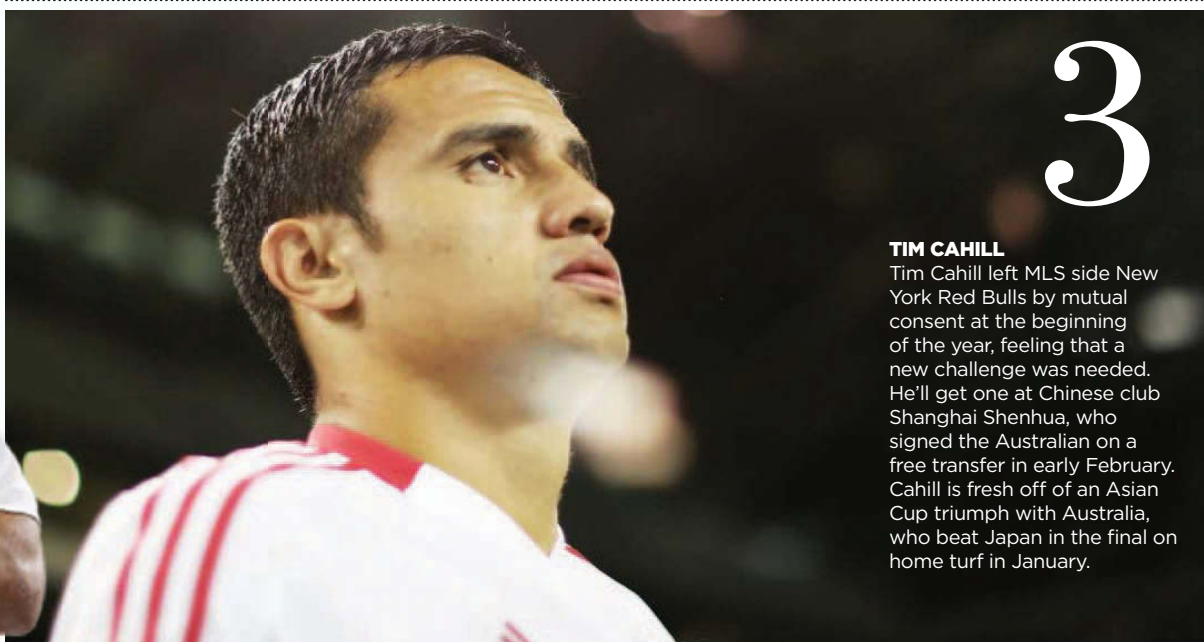
Jermain Defoe joined Sunderland in a swap deal that also saw Jozy Altidore move to Toronto FC in the process. Defoe was thrown straight into the Black Cats' relegation dogfight and has duly obliged, scoring two goals in his first five games for the North East club.



3

TIM CAHILL

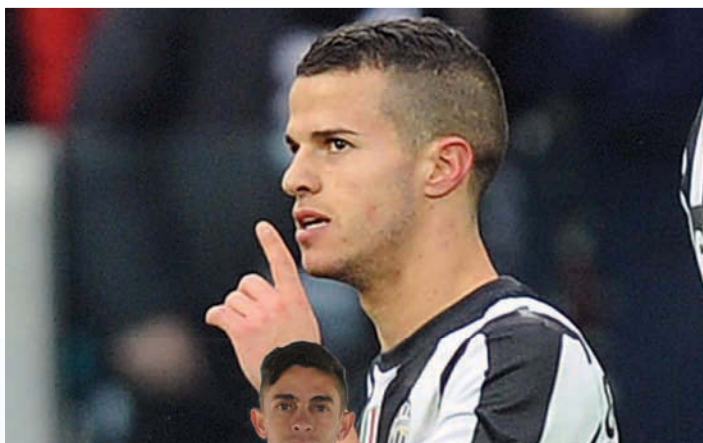
Tim Cahill left MLS side New York Red Bulls by mutual consent at the beginning of the year, feeling that a new challenge was needed. He'll get one at Chinese club Shanghai Shenhua, who signed the Australian on a free transfer in early February. Cahill is fresh off of an Asian Cup triumph with Australia, who beat Japan in the final on home turf in January.



4

SEBASTIAN GIOVINCO

The free signing of Sebastian Giovinco by Toronto FC raised a few eyebrows in January, with the 28-year old still capable of impressing at Juventus or another European club. He had only made two starts this season under new Juve boss Massimiliano Allegri, though, and when Toronto came calling, Giovinco couldn't resist the challenge of taking the city's expectations on his shoulders.

**GABRIEL PAULISTA**

Brazilian Gabriel Paulista moved to Arsenal from Villarreal in Spain for \$25.7-million, a relatively modest sum on this list but an impressive one for a central defender. Gabriel has provided much-needed cover on Arsenal's backline, and at just 24, Gunners fans will hope he can be a mainstay at the back for years to come.



6

7

SEYDOU DOUMBIA

Deadline day saw Ivorian hitman Seydou Doumbia move to Roma from CSKA Moscow in a \$20.6-million deal. The speedy striker scored twice at

Manchester City in November in the Champions League, but Serie A is a notoriously difficult league to hit the ground running in. International teammate Gervinho will be able to help Doumbia settle in the Italian capital.

**JUAN CUADRADO**

Colombian winger Juan Cuadrado joined Chelsea from Fiorentina in a \$49.7-million deal. With Mohamed Salah moving the other way on loan, there's room for the speedy winger on the Chelsea roster. Expect some impressive dribbling from Cuadrado, although he may have to reign in his individual instincts to fit with José Mourinho's system at Chelsea.

8

9

**ENZO PÉREZ**

Enzo Pérez moved from Benfica to Valencia in a \$35.3-million deal, making an instant impact in his debut by helping Los Che to a 2-1 win over Real Madrid. The Argentine central midfielder has won everything with Estudiantes in his homeland and with Benfica, and now that he's hitting his prime the competition of Spain's top league should prove a worthwhile challenge.

5

ANDRE SCHURRLE

World Cup winner André Schürrle has always impressed as a substitute for Chelsea, but with first-team minutes at a premium, he opted to join Wolfsburg in his native Germany for a \$41.9-million fee. The winger

has a Canadian connection, as well - his girlfriend Montana Yorke hails from Maple Ridge, B.C.



TOP TEN MONEY TRANSFERS JANUARY 2015 TRANSFER WINDOW

- 1) WILFRIED BONY - SWANSEA CITY TO MANCHESTER CITY (£28M)
- 2) JUAN CUADRADO - FIORENTINA TO CHELSEA (£26.1M)
- 3) ANDRE SCHURRLE - CHELSEA TO WOLFSBURG (£22M)
- 4) ENZO PEREZ - BENFICA TO VALENCIA (UNDISCLOSED - APPROX £20M)
- 5) GABRIEL PAULISTA - VILLARREAL TO ARSENAL (£14M)
- 6) BERNARDO SILVA - BENFICA TO MONACO (UNDISCLOSED - APPROX £12M)
- 7) LUCAS SILVA - CRUZEIRO TO REAL MADRID (UNDISCLOSED - APPROX £11.5M)
- 8) SEYDOU DOUMBIA - CSKA MOSCOW TO AS ROMA (£10.85M)
- 9) RYAN BERTRAND - CHELSEA TO SOUTHAMPTON (£10M)
- 10) MANOLO GABBIADINI - SAMPDORIA TO NAPOLI (£9.75M)

Fan Talk

10

**WILFRIED BONY**

Wilfried Bony wrapped up the African Cup of Nations with Ivory Coast before joining his new teammates at Manchester City, where he'll complement an already-impressive strikeforce that boasts the likes of Sergio Agüero and Edin Džeko. Bony's \$53.3-million pricetag would suggest that City coach Manuel Pellegrini plans to use him straight away.



FROM LIVERPOOL TO L.A.

AFTER 17 SEASONS AS A ONE-CLUB MAN, LIVERPOOL'S ENGLAND MIDFIELDER STEVEN GERRARD LEAVES FOR PASTURES NEW AT THE END OF THE SEASON TO JOIN LA GALAXY. DAVE TAYLOR LOOKS BACK OVER A STAND OUT CAREER THAT PROVES THAT WHILE THE PREMIER LEAGUE SIDE MAY HAVE MADE A BIG MISTAKE, THE MLS OUTFIT HAVEN'T.

From making his debut as a raw 18-year-old to leaving as a classy 34-year-old, Steven Gerrard has been one of Liverpool's best ever players.

Some like one of the planet's best ever footballers, Zinedine Zidane, go even further and believe the Merseyside born ace has been the world's best midfielder. "Steven Gerrard might not get the attention of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, but yes, I think he just might be the world's top midfielder," said the French World Cup winning legend a few years back. "If you don't have a player like Gerrard, who is the engine room, it can affect the whole team. He has great passing ability, can tackle and scores goals, but most importantly he gives the players around him confidence and belief. You can't learn that - players like him are just born with that presence."

This special authority has been seen on countless occasions and still on show this season, as the FA Cup win over League two outfit Wimbledon highlighted with his two goals turning defeat into victory. That was pertinently Gerrard's first game since he confirmed his summer departure for MLS and, after a slow start we saw the real Gerrard re-emerge. In the 12th minute he played the ball out wide to Javier Manquillo on the right and as soon as it left his foot he burst into the box on one of his famous, fearless runs. The return came in and he stooped to head the ball in an area where studs fly, before bravely directing it past the 'keeper for his first goal of the night.

His game-saving second came midway through the second half just as the visitors started to lose their way, arriving via his extensive range of free-kicks, flying into the top left-hand corner of the net like a runaway Exocet.

Yet despite the obvious joy in his celebrations, those who know this quiet family man believe there was also a great sadness behind his delight. It was if he realised there would not be too many more times that he would be celebrating a great goal for his beloved Reds. Sparing Liverpool's blushes had become an almost necessary habit and his brilliant brace showed just how much he will be missed when he leaves at the end of the season. In nerve-racking games like that one, he will be missed as much as he would ever be at much grander stadiums like Camp Nou, San Siro or the Bernabeu.

Gerrard believes one of the turning points that helped push him towards the exit door came when the Reds' boss, Brendan Rogers, left him out of the Champions League second leg against Real Madrid last November. "I think the key point or conversation was when the boss sat me down not so long ago and said it was time to manage my games for me and for the team," he explained. "I'm bright enough to realise it is the right thing for everyone but when you've been a starter and a mainstay in the team for so long it was a very difficult conversation to have. I accept it and I'll continue to give everything I've got but that was the key point that made me decide to leave. I've been coming to this training ground since I was eight and I always knew it was going to end one day and that it was going to be an emotional decision. That decision is here."

Not that it needs pointing out but when Gerrard ends what will have been a 28-year association with Liverpool, the final link to the club's fabulous European Cup history goes with him. Since the first competition win in 1977 there has always been a locally-born hero like Gerrard in the team. Players like him, Robbie Fowler, Sammy Lee, Jimmy Case and Tommy Smith are all linked to each other in one way or another and are synonymous with the Reds' fabulous continental successes. Like those before him, Gerrard has been the very soul of a Reds team that has gone through many iterations under different managers and even different owners. He has always been there to represent the club, always a link between the fans and the team and come June, that bond will break in the same way as the link with the team's continental successes of old.

One of his and Liverpool's most noticeable European achievements over his time there was that magic 2005 Champions League Final victory over Milan in Istanbul. At the time Gerrard was receiving some abuse from his own fans after he dared ask where his team was going



PLAYING STYLE

The 34-year-old ace principally plays in central midfield, but his versatility has also seen him play in several other roles. As a complete athlete he has played in defence as a right-back, in the middle as a defensive midfielder, in attack as second striker, in behind as a playmaker and also out wide on the right flank. However, most of his career saw him play as an archetypal box-to-box midfielder before a recent switch as he has matured to play a deeper role. He is just as effective in that position as in any of the others he has occupied before.

GERRARD'S CROWNING GLORY

Of all the stand out games Gerrard has played in, unquestionably his best was seen the last time Liverpool won the Champions League. His performance that night in May 2005 has gone down in the annals of not just Liverpool's history but in world football as well. It had all started badly for Liverpool, though, as their Italian opponents Milan went in at half time leading 3-0 in a heavily one-sided first 45. Yet, just eight minutes into the second half Gerrard brought Liverpool hope when he jumped to firmly nod home a cross from John Arne Riise.

The captain, unable to contain his excitement, wind-milled his arms urging the team not to celebrate and get back to kick-off positions, to start the comeback. It was a comeback from what, let's face it, had seemed almost impossible after that first half. But, Gerrard's subsequent performance that night has been hailed as one of the most single, supreme sustained achievements of individual influence in modern football.

The Reds went on to score two more, the equaliser arriving after Gennaro Gattuso pulled down Gerrard in the area just as he seemed certain to score. Dida saved Fernando Alonso's penalty but the Spaniard followed up the rebound to score and make it 3-3 to climax an incredible turnaround. Then came the victorious penalty shoot-out with Liverpool claiming a glorious, wonderful win on that unforgettable night. "Lifting the trophy has to be the best feeling ever," said Gerrard and in reference to overtures from Chelsea and criticism from Liverpool fans. "How can I think of leaving Liverpool after a night like this?"



TIME LINE

1997
Signed professional forms for Liverpool in November after joining Liverpool's youth academy as a nine-year-old.

1988
He made his League debut November 29th



2000
He made his international debut May 31



2000-01 Season
He had become an integral part of the team helping them win the League Cup, FA Cup and the UEFA Cup.

2002
Scored his first England goal in the 5-1 win over Germany in Munich.

2002
Missed the 2002 World Cup through injury..



and what direction they were heading in after Chelsea had inquired after him. Yet to his credit Gerrard never allowed it to affect him, at least not on the surface, and he played the game of his life.

Apart from his superb comeback goal in that game, there are plenty of other magical moments that immediately come to mind. You only have to recall the 2006 FA Cup Final win for one, a game known as 'the Gerrard Final', where his two goals and all round performance earned that famous trophy. That game saw him score the Goal of the Season against West Ham, as despite being hit heavily by cramp and losing 3-2 heading into stoppage time, he rescued the Reds with a 35-yard thunderbolt into the bottom right hand corner, before going on to help Liverpool win on penalties. His performance and two goals that

Think on about his goal, again from 35 yards, against Manchester United in 2001, when Liverpool took the lead via his spectacular opener, which nestled in the top corner of Fabien Barthez's goal.

Let's also not forget that his sublime play was not only confined to Liverpool, with many notable goals and performances for England, including one of his more famous ones in the 5-1 hammering of Germany in Munich in September 2001.

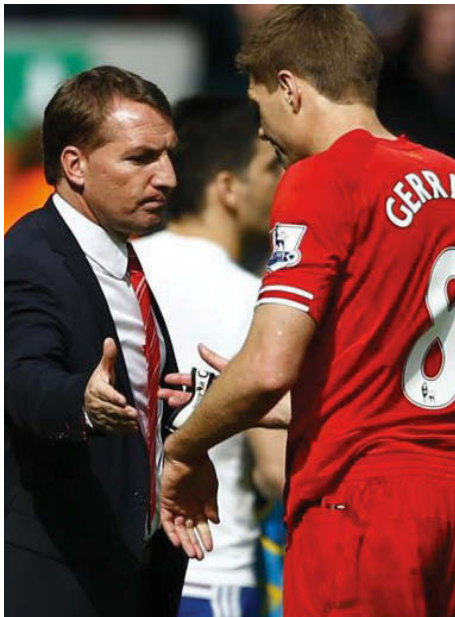
Losing 1-0 in a World Cup qualifier, Michael Owen scored the equaliser before Gerrard netted a game changer of a second that saw him react superbly in the aftermath of a David Beckham free-kick almost on half-time. "To score my first goal for England in a game of that magnitude against our biggest rivals was a dream come true," he recalled. "I'd been in the squad for less than 18 months, a baby in terms of international football. Looking back, the result and performance it feels all the more special because people still speak so passionately about it. Of all my caps, that has got to be the best result I've been involved in."

Taking everything into consideration, from last January's FA Cup heroics and his goal against Manchester United at the turn of the millennium, while recalling his extraordinary strikes, his selfless play, precise passing and sheer grit in other games, he will be sorely missed in England. LA Galaxy have a superb midfield general coming their way, who can certainly keep them playing in the manner they have grown accustomed to. Liverpool's loss is Los Angeles' gain.



Above. Gerrard's international career ended in 2014 with 114 caps and 21 goals.

Below. Steven Gerrard has remained one true constant at Liverpool through many changes around him



Factfile
Name: Steven Gerrard
Born: May 30, 1980 (Liverpool)
Ht / Wt: 1.83m / 83kgs
Position: Midfielder
Club: Liverpool

Club stats			
Season	Club	Apps	Goals
1998-99	Liverpool	12	-
1999-00	Liverpool	29	1
2000-01	Liverpool	33	7
2001-02	Liverpool	28	3
2002-03	Liverpool	34	5
2003-04	Liverpool	34	4
2004-05	Liverpool	30	7
2005-06	Liverpool	32	10
2006-07	Liverpool	36	7
2007-08	Liverpool	34	11
2008-09	Liverpool	31	16
2009-10	Liverpool	33	9
2010-11	Liverpool	21	4
2011-12	Liverpool	18	5
2012-13	Liverpool	36	9
2013-14	Liverpool	34	13
2014-15	Liverpool	20	5

International stats		
Year	Apps	Goals
2000	2	-
2001	6	1
2002	5	1
2003	8	1
2004	10	2
2005	8	1
2006	13	4
2007	11	2
2008	7	2
2009	7	2
2010	12	3
2011	-	-
2012	11	-
2013	8	2
2014	6	-

QUOTES ON GERRARD

Steven Gerrard's time in England earned him not only the adoration of his fans and teammates, but the respect of his peers and opponents.

"For me, he is among the best ever. Whenever you play Liverpool you know you have to get him out of the game and, if not, it's all over for you. I can't even think of a striker who has scored as many important goals, never mind a midfielder. How many times has he done it in the dying seconds of a game?" - former Arsenal hero Thierry Henry.

"At one stage, I am sure he was heading his own crosses in. Gerrard had that presence. He was a here, there and every-f*****-where player, in the style of Bryan Robson." - Gareth Southgate.

"I was crazy about Gerrard. I remember in the final for Liverpool against Milan, you saw him up front, on the wings, and a moment later he was back, marking the playmaker. I have never seen such a complete midfielder." - Claudio Marchisio, who plays in Gerrard's position for Juventus, recalls watching his Champions League Final performance in awe as a teenager.

"I think of him as being at the same level as Pirlo. Vision, technique, but he is powerful as well. Stevie can do anything. It's going to be very difficult to find another player like him in the future." - Mario Balotelli.

"He's a fantastic statesman - he has been unbelievably successful with this football club with what he's done, the amount of games he has pulled out the mire, and the general way he conducts himself." - Kenny Dalglish.

QUOTES BY GERRARD

Steven Gerrard's ability on show from an early age drew as much expectation as it did plaudits.

"We are being judged all the time and you have to accept it and embrace it and enjoy the pressure. That's what I have learned to do ever since I was 19. I had to. There is no hiding place. People will point fingers." - on pressure.

"I think when you are captain and you're asked a question in front of the cameras you have to be honest, or what is the point in speaking? Players who say the wrong thing, or lie, or twist what is really happening out there...what is the point? I'd rather not go and speak." - on leadership.

EUROPEAN HONOURS

- Champions League: winner 2005, runner-up 2007
- UEFA Cup: winner 2001
- UEFA Super Cup: winner 2001
- UEFA Club Footballer of the Year: 2005
- Domestic honours
- Premier League runner-up: 2002, 2009, 2014
- FA Cup Winner: 2001, 2006
- Football League Cup: 2001, 2003, 2012
- FA Community Shield: 2006



Left LA Galaxy fans welcome a legend of the game this summer

2003
Named Liverpool Captain

CAPTAIN

2005
Captained Liverpool to Champions League success against Milan and also won the man of the match award.

2006
Scored twice in the FA Cup Final against West Ham to win the trophy on penalties following the 3-3 draw.

2010 / 2014
Was captain at the 2010 and 2014 World Cups and played an important role at World Cup 2006.

2009
Won England's Footballer of the Year

Trophy icon

2012
Led Liverpool to their first silverware in six years when they won the League Cup





THE PARD ROAD BACK TO PALACE

MORE THAN TWO DECADES AFTER FAMOUSLY REPRESENTING THEM AS A PLAYER, ALAN PARDEW HAS BECOME MANAGER OF CRYSTAL PALACE. STEPHEN DONOVAN EXPLORES THE ROUTE THAT HAS LED TO HIS RETURN

Three weekends into the 2014-15 Premier League season, Alan Pardew watched his Newcastle United side draw 3-3 with Crystal Palace in a classic encounter, but he couldn't have imagined that a little over four months later, he would be in charge of the club that he represented with such distinction as a player between 1987 and 1991. Although his sixth managerial role will be a huge challenge, any success here would increase the mutual feeling of affection between himself and the supporters.

It has been something of a rollercoaster ride that has brought Pardew back, enjoying multiple successes and suffering the occasional heartache as a manager. His four-year stay at Newcastle was unique as he constantly went from being under-fire to being universally praised, a set of circumstances that led him back to the serene surroundings which he graced a quarter of a century ago.

Up until the age of 26, Pardew was only a semi-professional and played his football exclusively in English football's non-League circuit with Dulwich Hamlet and Yeovil Town among others before he got his big move to Palace in 1987. At a cost of just £7,500, he went on to become part of the most successful period in the club's history. The South Londoners were in the second tier at the time and on the rise, and promotion to the top-flight duly arrived in 1989 through the Play-offs, with Pardew playing a key role as they defeated Blackburn Rovers over two legs. But it was in 1990 that Pardew would really make his name, with the club coming so close to winning the FA Cup for the first time in their history. In the last final to go to a replay, he played both games as Palace famously lost 1-0 to Manchester United, after the original match at Wembley ended in a 3-3 draw. Pardew's biggest contribution came in the semi-final with Liverpool as he scored one of the most memorable goals in the club's history to earn the Eagles a 4-3 victory after extra-time. That effort was undoubtedly the standout moment of Pardew's playing career, but he wasn't finished. In his final season with Palace, 1990-91, he helped them to their highest ever League position of third in the First Division - now the English Premier League.

That superb contribution over four years ensured that he was remembered fondly by the Palace fans, who always gave him a positive reception when facing the club as an opposition manager, while his winner against Liverpool all those years ago remains very much part of their folklore.

He then made the short journey to Charlton Athletic, the first of his former clubs that he would go on to manage. He was there for four years until 1995, scoring 24 goals in 124 League appearances, including an impressive



Left. Alan Pardew enjoys legendary status at Crystal Palace for what he helped them to achieve in a four-year playing spell

10 from midfield in 1992-93. After a short spell with Tottenham, for whom he represented in the Intertoto Cup and was involved in their record 8-0 defeat to Cologne, his playing days wound down with two years at Barnet and then a move to Reading, where he would launch his superb coaching career. Over four years as manager at the Madejski Stadium, it was success after success as he lifted the club from obscurity in the third tier of English football to the brink of the Premier League, recovering from a Play-off Final defeat in 2001 to win automatic promotion a year later. He soon became regarded as one of the most promising young managers in the country, and in 2003 he guided Reading to a Play-off place in the Championship, and only defeat to Wolverhampton Wanderers prevented him from becoming the first man to manage the Royals in the top-flight.

The progress he had made earned Pardew the top job at West Ham United, who had just been relegated from the Premier League, in the summer of 2003. Again, he made a strong impression, and although he narrowly missed out on promotion at the first attempt, nothing could prevent him from glory in 2005 as the East London club won the Play-offs and returned to the elite.

And he didn't stop there, establishing West Ham back in the Premier League with an impressive top half finish, while also guiding them to the FA Cup Final, where only the heroism of Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard deprived him of a first major honour. However, his tenure at Upton Park didn't have much longer to last, as he was sacked following a poor run during the first half of the 2006-07 season.

That proved to be the first major challenge of Pardew's managerial career, as things went totally wrong after he famously convinced Argentine duo Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano to move to West Ham. Fortunes didn't improve during his next role either, as he experienced relegation for the first time as manager of Charlton Athletic, and then found himself unable to inspire a return to the Premier League, meaning that he lost his job in late 2008.

Following that disappointment, he had to return to the third tier to try and restore his reputation, moving to Southampton in the summer of 2009. He had an excellent winning record and signed some of the players which have since inspired their recent successes in the Premier League, but Pardew was not given the chance to lead that particular charge, leaving in August 2010 due to a poor relationship with the club's hierarchy. Back then, he could have been forgiven for thinking that his managerial career was on the slide, but in December 2010 he got an unexpected call from Newcastle United, who

appointed him as successor to Chris Hughton. He never fully endeared himself to the supporters, but experienced early success by re-establishing the club in the Premier League, before guiding them to fifth place in 2011-12 against all the odds, making shrewd signings including strikers Demba Ba and Papiss Cisse. Unfortunately, that couldn't be repeated for the rest of his tenure, and as a result the atmosphere towards Pardew became hostile throughout 2014, with frequent protests and demonstrations often overshadowing events on the pitch. But despite the pressure, the players remained behind him and ended the year on a positive note, while the man himself maintained his integrity and showed admirable strength amid persistent abuse. But eventually that was one of the factors which saw him leave for Palace. The contrast between his final months in the North East and the reception the 53-year-old was given in his first Premier League match back at his old stomping ground against Tottenham spoke volumes, and that the game ended in a memorable come-from-behind victory only served to increase the sense of endearment that exists between Pardew and the Eagles fans. He was questioned by many for leaving a very big club like Newcastle with a huge fan base for a relatively smaller one where he would have a smaller playing budget and slightly less luxurious facilities, but his decision ensures that his career gains more stability and his reputation will be enhanced. It is another example of how things in football can change so quickly and suddenly, and Pardew seems to have restored a feel-good factor to Palace in such a short space of time. The aim remains to keep them in the Premier League, but the whole club has been galvanised by his arrival and as a result they will be aiming higher. The players at his disposal don't lack fight, spirit and determination, but Pardew looks to be the man who can unleash their quality, with pace in wide areas provided by Yannick Bolasie and Jason Puncheon, while Dwight Gayle is a natural goalscorer. He also has a player with Champions League experience in former Arsenal striker Marouane Chamakh, who puts in no shortage of effort. Former boss Tony Pulis laid the foundations for Palace to establish themselves as a Premier League club for the first time by doing a remarkable job in the 2013-14 season, and the early signs are that Pardew can take them forward into an even brighter future. Whether he can emulate the achievements of his playing days and help them to a FA Cup Final and a third-place finish is up for serious debate, he can return the good times to Selhurst Park and oversee a rise towards gaining loftier ambitions than just staying in the top-flight.

Factfile
Name: Alan Pardew
Born: July 18, 1961 (London, England)
Ht / Wt: 1.80m / 69.84kg
Position: Central midfielder, now manager
Club: Crystal Palace

Club stats				
Season	Club	Apps	Goals	
1987-88	Crystal Palace	24	-	
1988-89	Crystal Palace	57	3	
1989-90	Crystal Palace	51	8	
1990-91	Crystal Palace	27	1	
1991-92	Crystal Palace	9	-	
1991-92	Charlton Athletic	38	5	
1992-93	Charlton Athletic	44	10	
1993-94	Charlton Athletic	37	6	
1994-95	Charlton Athletic	27	5	
1995-96	Tott. Hotspur	4	-	
1995-96	Barnet	49	-	
1996-97	Barnet	30	-	

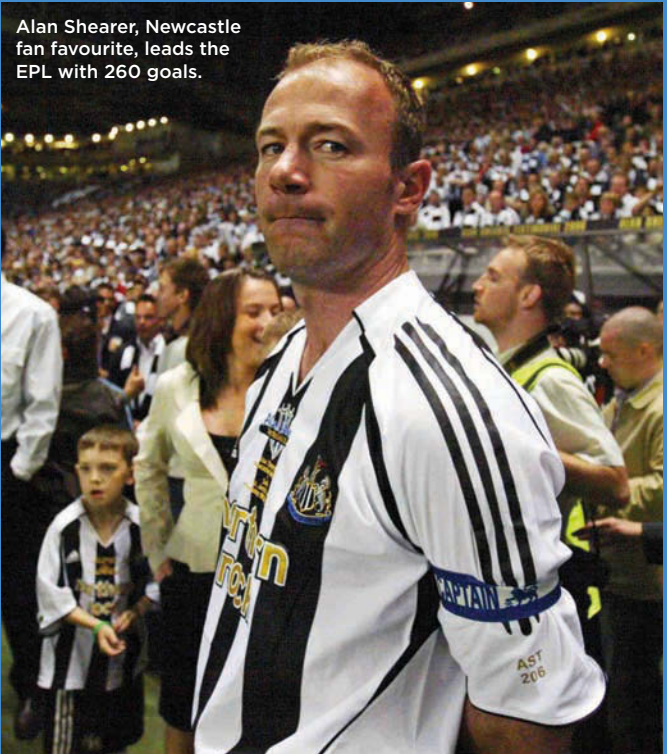
Manager stats						
Years	Club	Pld	W	D	L	W%
99-03	Reading	211	102	52	57	48
03-06	W.H. United	163	67	38	58	41
07-09	Charlton Ath.	90	28	26	36	31
09-10	Southampton	64	34	17	13	53
10-14	Newcastle Unt.	185	71	41	73	38



Left. Despite a difficult end to his spell at Newcastle United, Alan Pardew was given a hero's welcome back to Crystal Palace

WHERE PALACE MUST IMPROVE

Alan Pardew has proven already to be a good manager, but there are areas he must address at Crystal Palace
Find a goalscorer - One of the main shortcomings that led to Pardew's predecessor Neil Warnock being sacked was a chronic lack of goals. Dwight Gayle has occasionally shown that he is capable of scoring in the Premier League, but has struggled to establish himself in the first-team during his time at the club, while Glenn Murray has only scored one goal in the top-flight despite scoring plenty in the divisions below. The Eagles were hoping for better from Fraizer Campbell, who signed in the summer of 2014, but his goals return has been disappointing and has found himself out of the team. Meanwhile, Marouane Chamakh is a very capable player and has an excellent work rate, but it remains to be seen whether he is the man to score at least 15 goals a season. Therefore, adding a proven scorer at the top level must be a priority. Pardew must also be sure to get more consistency out of his wingers, as Yannick Bolasie, Jason Pucheon and loanee Wilfried Zaha all have quality in abundance, but don't produce the right final ball often enough. Their strengths lie on the counter-attack thanks to their pace, but the trio have often found it difficult when taking the game to the opposition despite seeing plenty of the ball. Bolasie in particular can be wasteful and has struggled to add goals to his game, but should he and his partners in crime get it right more often, defences will have a hard time trying to handle them.



Alan Shearer, Newcastle fan favourite, leads the EPL with 260 goals.

MORE RETURNING HEROES

Alan Pardew is not the first man to manage a club in the Premier League whom he used to represent as a player... Tottenham have put no less than three of their former stars in charge since the inception of the Premier League in 1992, and have had mixed results. Ossie Ardiles struggled in his year in charge, before Glenn Hoddle failed to establish them as a top half side in a reign that lasted between 2001 and 2003. As recently as December 2013, Tim Sherwood was given the role of Head Coach on an 18-month contract, but was sacked the following May despite an impressive win percentage and a respectable sixth-place finish. The Premier League's highest ever scorer remains Alan Shearer with 260 goals, making him a firm favourite at Newcastle United, where he had spent the final years of his playing career. They enlisted his help to keep them in the top-flight in 2009, putting him in caretaker charge for the last eight games of that season, but they only won once and so suffered a painful relegation. Also unsuccessful was Graeme Souness, the first Liverpool manager of the Premier League era, where they rarely threatened to win major trophies, and more recently Kenny Dalglish lasted just one season in his second spell as permanent boss at Anfield. Arguably the club's finest ever player, the Scot, who had a silverware-laden six years as manager between 1985 and 1991, led them to a disappointing eighth place and was sacked despite success in the Cups. However, even winning the FA Cup and the Champions League failed to save Roberto Di Matteo at Chelsea.



BLUE IS THE COLOUR

CHELSEA SURGED TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE SUMMIT EARLY IN THE SEASON AND, POWERED BY NEW SIGNINGS AND OLD TRICKS, HAVE DOMINATED IN STYLE, ANDREW TUFT WRITES...

Jose Mourinho is nothing if not a man of his word. The Special One told the Premier League that in 2014-15 his Chelsea side would be ready to challenge for the title and, true enough, the Blues have been the pace-setters this season. Mourinho's wish really is his command.

It was less of a prediction and more of a promise - with a few caveats. Mourinho spoke at the end of the 2013-14 campaign of the need for a handful of signings to supplement the squad that finished third and vowed that, if his targets arrived, a genuine title tilt would follow. They did, and it has, Cesc Fabregas and Diego Costa chief among the new faces catapulting the Blues to the top of the table.

But it hasn't been quite as easy as adding the two Spain internationals and watching Chelsea go. Mourinho has had to juggle the question of Petr Cech or Thibaut Courtois, the advancing years of John Terry, the decision to let Frank Lampard leave for the United States - only to see him turn up at Manchester City - and a long-running row with Vicente del Bosque over Costa's dodgy hamstring, as well as Costa's frequent transgressions. That Chelsea have for the most part made the season look straightforward is testament to Mourinho and his charges. Perhaps only Mourinho, with his combination of bravado and brains and the high esteem in which he is held in west London, could have survived Chelsea's first trophy-less season in three years and come out stronger.

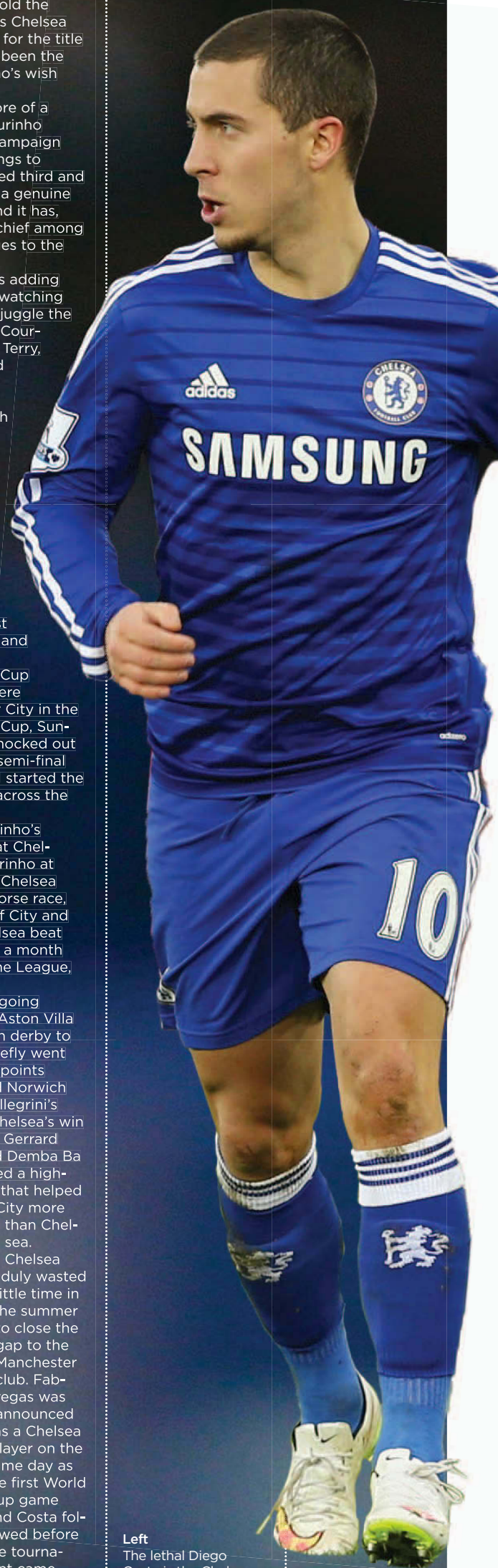
Chelsea lost the European Super Cup on penalties to Bayern Munich, were behind Liverpool and Manchester City in the League, beaten by City in the FA Cup, Sunderland in the League Cup and knocked out of the Champions League at the semi-final stage by Atletico Madrid, and still started the season as favourites for the title across the board.

Even still, few really bought Mourinho's insistence throughout 2013-14 that Chelsea weren't title contenders. Mourinho at one point went so far as to claim Chelsea were the 'little horse' in a three-horse race, competing against the stallions of City and Liverpool. This, coming after Chelsea beat City at the Etihad Stadium and in a month that ended with Chelsea top of the League, was roundly mocked.

The so-called little horse did fall, going down to nine-men and defeat at Aston Villa and then losing a London derby to Crystal Palace. They briefly went top again but dropped points against Sunderland and Norwich City allowed Manuel Pellegrini's steed to gallop away. Chelsea's win at Anfield when Steven Gerrard was unseated and Demba Ba scored proved a high-

light that helped City more than Chelsea.

Chelsea duly wasted little time in the summer to close the gap to the Manchester club. Fabregas was announced as a Chelsea player on the same day as the first World Cup game and Costa followed before the tournament came to an end.



Left
The lethal Diego Costa is the Chelsea danger man



"I DON'T KNOW PLAYERS WHO ARE CONSIDERED LEGENDS IN CLUBS WITHOUT WINNING TITLES, SO HAZARD HAS TO DO THAT BUT THE POTENTIAL, I THINK, EVERY BODY KNOWS. THAT'S A CLEAR CAMPAIGN. PEOPLE REACT WITH CHELSEA IN A WAY THEY DON'T REACT TO OTHER TEAMS. IT IS A SCANDAL."
- JOSE MOURINHO

With Courtois returned from a three-year loan at Atletico - where he played with Costa and fellow signing, left-back Filipe Luis, and against his parent club in Europe - Chelsea's new spine was in place. Mourinho fashioned a team with characteristics reminiscent of his first great Chelsea side, the one that won consecutive titles between 2004 and 2006, but with a modern slant. The power remained, Nemanja Matic protecting the defence in a manner to make Claude Makelele proud, and Costa proved every bit as lethal as Didier Drogba. But in Fabregas, Oscar and Eden Hazard, Mourinho has been able to call on a creative trio to far surpass that of a decade ago. Hazard, a player inherited by Mourinho, has justified the regular praise of his manager. "He is probably the best young player in the world," Mourinho said in 2014. "Eden means a lot to us because he is a fantastic player. We have big hopes he will go from the top player he is at this moment and will reach higher levels to become one of the best." Mourinho later put his finger on what Hazard can do to reach the level of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. "He needs to win titles because titles make players' history," he acknowledged. "I don't know players who are considered legends in clubs without winning titles, so he has to do that but the potential, I think, everybody knows." This season, Mourinho has set about helping Hazard become a Chelsea legend. Chelsea went unbeaten in the League between August and December, put six past Everton at Goodison Park, beat Arsenal, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur and racked up 33 goals in 14 games before falling to defeat at Newcastle. Man City's form meant Chelsea couldn't pull away from the pack but they were the front-runners throughout the first half of the season. All of this while battling a conspiracy against them, at least according to Mourinho. He lashed out when Fabregas was denied a penalty and booked for diving in the draw with Southampton, pointing the finger at everyone and no-one in particular. "That's a campaign, that's a clear campaign," Mourinho insisted. "People, pundits, commentators, Coaches from other teams, they react with Chelsea in a way they don't react to other teams. In other countries it would be a front-page scandal because it is a scandal." Cynics might suggest that Mourinho's true intention was to avoid questions as to why Chelsea had failed to beat the Saints but the siege mentality his rant induced is part of the Mourinho weaponry. He was fined £25,000 for the outburst - and more complaints followed in time - but Mourinho might privately argue it's a price worth paying if it helps

"I WILL FIGHT FOR EVERY BALL, EVERY GOAL AND I WILL GET BANNED DURING THE SEASON. BUT I WILL ALSO WIN YOU MORE POINTS THAN LAST YEAR AND WE WILL WIN TROPHIES."
- DIEGO COSTA

Left
Jose Mourinho promised Chelsea would fight for the title this season

Chelsea land the title. The Mourinho master plan, making the best use of Hazard's boundless potential and Fabregas' numerous assists [see sidebar] would be impotent if not for Costa. In the Brazil-born Spain international Mourinho appears to have found a kindred spirit, a player as feisty and eager to win as the man on the bench. Mourinho jettisoned the struggling Fernando Torres and the past-his-peak Samuel Eto'o in favour of the forward who fired Atletico to La Liga success, and was rewarded by Costa plundering 11 goals in his first 10 League games. The manager recognised the difference as early as September. "This is the player we bought and we were waiting for since last season," said Mourinho. "This is why we didn't buy a striker [in January 2014]. We were waiting for him, we have him and hopefully everything goes well." Costa forecast his personal success - as well as the controversy that would dog him throughout the season - when he met his Chelsea colleagues for the first time. "I'm very happy to be playing for Chelsea," the £32m signing began by way of introduction. "But there will be times when I frustrate and annoy you. I will fight for every ball, every goal and I will get banned during the season. But I will also win you more points than you had last year and we will win trophies," he reportedly promised. Mourinho himself couldn't have said it better - or more accurately, particularly after the stamping episode with Emre Can. Costa was no stranger to incident during his time in La Liga. There was a spitting spat involving Sergio Ramos and pitched battles with Sevilla trio Federico Fazio, Gary Medel and Geoffrey Kondogbia, among other major and minor altercations. But there were goals too, and lots of them, particularly after Costa was entrusted with replacing Radamel Falcao. With Costa continuing his prolific form in the Premier League, Mourinho was moved to declare the signing more than a success. "You can consider [Costa a bargain] because the market is crazy and the values are very high," he noted. "For a striker like him, a champion in Spain, a Champions League finalist, a 25-year-old, we consider the price was very much in our favour." And so is the Premier League, thanks to Fabregas, Hazard, Costa and, of course, Mourinho.



Above
Eden Hazard needs trophies to be a Chelsea legend, according to Mourinho

CHELSEA LAST 10

2014
3RD
PLACE

2013
3RD
PLACE

2012
6TH
PLACE

2011
2ND
PLACE



2009
3RD
PLACE

2008
2ND
PLACE

2007
2ND
PLACE



Fab-Regas

CHELSEA SURGED TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE SUMMIT EARLY IN THE SEASON AND, POWERED BY NEW SIGNINGS AND OLD TRICKS, HAVE DOMINATED IN STYLE, ANDREW TUFT WRITES...

Factfile

Name: Francesc Fabregas Soler
Born: April 5, 1987
Ht / Wt: 1.74m / 72kgs
Position: Midfield
Team: Chelsea

Club stats

Season	Club	Apps	Goals
2003-04	Arsenal	3	1
2004-05	Arsenal	46	3
2005-06	Arsenal	50	5
2006-07	Arsenal	54	4
2007-08	Arsenal	45	13
2008-09	Arsenal	33	3
2009-10	Arsenal	36	19
2010-11	Arsenal	36	9
2011-12	Barcelona	48	15
2012-13	Barcelona	48	14
2013-14	Barcelona	55	13
2014-15	Chelsea	27	4

It seemed unthinkable that Cesc Fabregas could play for a Premier League team other than Arsenal and yet the Spain midfielder has settled in so well at Chelsea, it's hard to picture him anywhere but Stamford Bridge. When it was first mooted that Fabregas could leave Barcelona in summer 2014, a return to Arsenal seemed a natural fit. But Arsene Wenger passed on the option of re-signing his former captain and Jose Mourinho swooped, Fabregas becoming the supply line for Diego Costa, among others. Fabregas' impact was immediate. He claimed two assists in Chelsea's first League game of the season, a 3-1 win at newly-promoted Burnley, with his pass for Andre Schurrle's goal drawing acclaim even from those who suffered by it. "The Fabregas pass is arguably the best I've seen in a long time because of the control, the awareness, the quality and shape," said Burnley manager Sean Dyche. "It lands perfectly for [Schurrle]."

The 27-year-old didn't stop there. No player recorded more Premier League assists by December 31 and Fabregas is on course to set a new season record, currently held by former Arsenal teammate Thierry Henry, who claimed 20 in 2002-03. Fabregas had 12 by Christmas.

Fabregas' partnership with Nemanja Matic has been cited by Mourinho as a key part of Chelsea's success. "They're both good brains in this team and I am happy with that because last season we could not control the game," he acknowledged, as Wenger's loss proves to be Mourinho's gain.

Above

Former Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas has settled in quickly at Chelsea

FABREGAS' IMPACT WAS IMMEDIATE. HE CLAIMED TWO ASSISTS IN CHELSEA'S FIRST LEAGUE GAME OF THE SEASON, A 3-1 WIN AT NEWLY-PROMOTED BURNLEY.

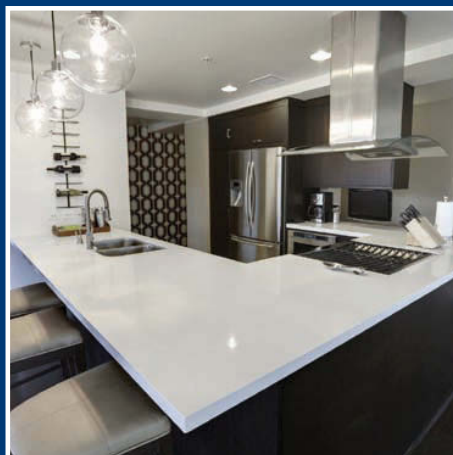
Left

Cesc Fabregas made a huge impact on Barcelona, playing with superstar Lio Messi.





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TIME TO SHINE



It took Mario Balotelli seven months, 14 appearances and 48 shots to finally get his first goal for Liverpool in the English top-flight. Antonio Labbate takes a look at whether the enigma can finally turn potential into product – and if that will be enough for Italy boss Antonio Conte

"Mario is not a champion." It isn't what was said about Mario Balotelli in Istanbul on that sunny July afternoon last year, but who said it. After four years of insisting that the striker was a key element of his national team, while defending him from his many critics and trying to nurture the potential greatness out of him, Cesare Prandelli's assessment was as damning as it was truthful.

"Balotelli is someone with great touches, but he is not a champion," noted the 56-year-old, as he was unveiled as the new Galatasaray boss just weeks after the Brazil 2014 debacle. "When I saw him for the last time, I told him that if he wanted to become the player that I think he can be then he needs to live in the real world and not a virtual one. If he returns to having his feet on the ground then he can become an actual champion and not just a player who has the ability to be one."

"IF HE RETURNS TO HAVING HIS FEET ON THE GROUND THEN HE CAN BECOME AN ACTUAL CHAMPION AND NOT JUST A PLAYER WHO HAS THE ABILITY TO BE ONE."

It's a verdict that Balotelli has heard on numerous occasions before. When you combine his sometimes questionable off the field antics with some of his infuriating laissez-faire on the pitch displays, it comes as little surprise that he is a man who divides opinion. There are some who think he'll never mature enough to truly deliver on a consistent basis at the top level, while there are those who just see too much ability in those boots of his to give up on his talent.

His summer move from Milan to Liverpool suggested just that. After openly chasing the former Inter player for years, the Rossoneri finally got their man in January 2013 from Manchester City. Less than 24 months later and the Diavolo felt a split was in the best interests of all parties when Liverpool made an offer which the Milan directors had no qualms in accepting.

The €20m price tag which the Merseyside outfit paid was almost insignificant in terms of the transfer fees Premiership clubs seem happy to throw around, but what spoke volumes was the fact that Balotelli had been netted as a replacement for Luis Suarez – the new Barcelona signing who had become a Kop hero thanks to an awesome scoring record of 82 goals in 133 games. While Balotelli is just as controversial as the biting Uruguayan, he's never really been as prolific – even if his 30 goals in 54 games for Milan were

pretty impressive.

"You can't compare Suarez and Balotelli, but Mario is coming in as an international striker and there is no doubt that he's a talent," Liverpool boss Brendan Rodgers said to justify his capture. "I think Mario is potentially world class."

"I THINK MARIO IS POTENTIALLY WORLD CLASS."

"Suarez elevated himself at this club – he wasn't world class when he came in but when he left to go to Barcelona he had put himself in that bracket. Mario is different. He's got a lot of experience, but he now has to consistently show his quality. That is what can elevate him to that level."

There is no doubt that Balotelli's first six months at Anfield have been problematic. By mid-February he had scored just three goals in 19 appearances, he'd had his injury problems, he wasn't totally comfortable with being asked to play as a lone forward and he'd been banned, as well as fined, for posting an alleged anti-Semitic post on Instagram. Yet, it's too soon to say that his return to the Premiership was a mistake for the club or himself.

Balotelli clearly has ability – his most ardent critics will even give him that. The truth is that you've got to motivate him, you've got to light the fire inside of him, you've got to get him to see the bigger picture. Key to that at Anfield will be Rodgers and the Northern Irishman is patiently sticking with the Italian. Sure, he's shown him the bench on occasions this term, but after the 2-1 win over Crystal Palace in the FA Cup, the manager was keen to praise his summer recruit. "The penny has dropped with Mario. He is training well and starting to really focus on his job in the team."

Liverpool was a decent choice for Balotelli. While the tabloid Press would still give him a hard time, the Premiership is a superior League to Serie A and Liverpool are arguably a grander force than Milan. As a result, there is less pressure on the player given that while he was the main man at San Siro, he doesn't really hold that status in England. In terms of someone trying to take a step up to the next level, dumping Milan for Liverpool was an upgrade in so many ways.

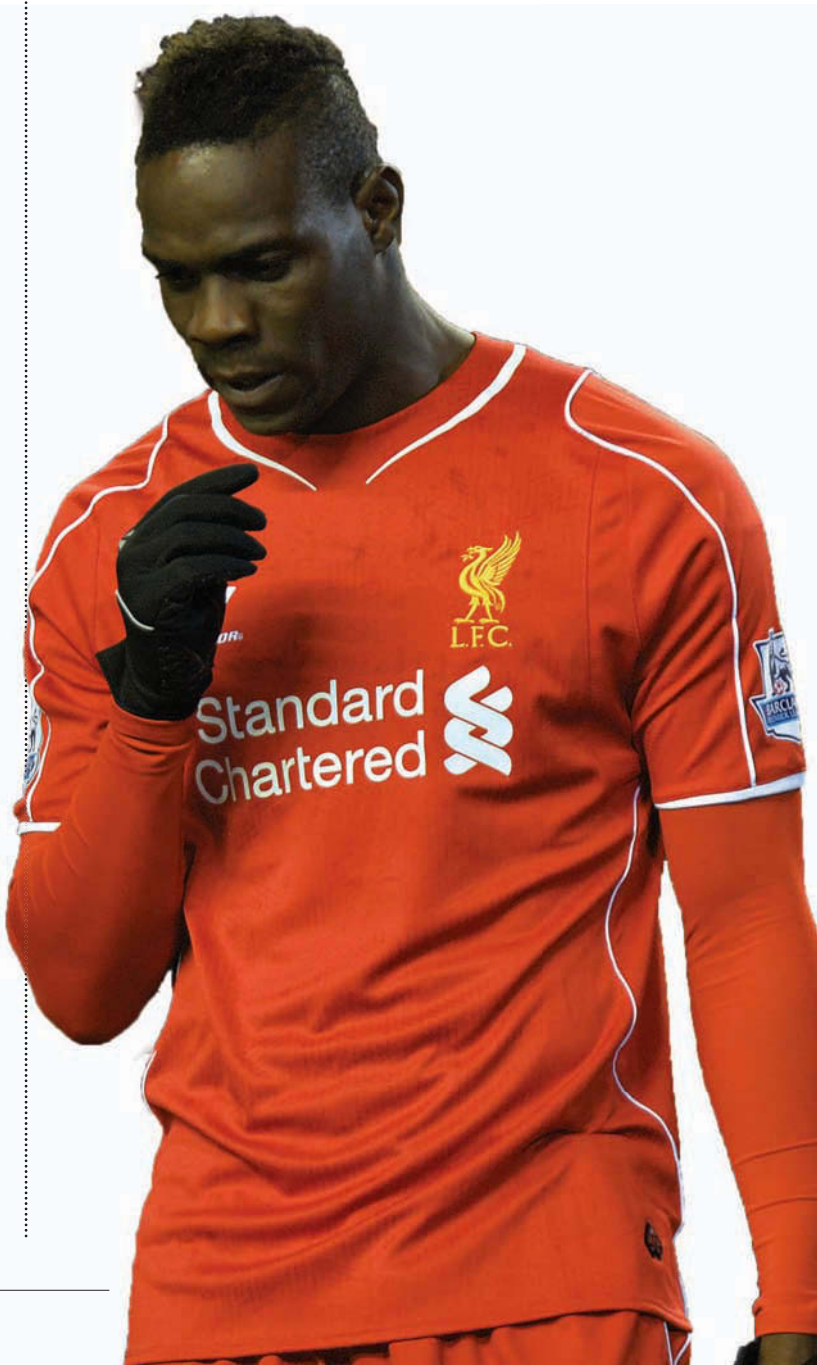
Serie A may have lost another of its headline stars in the summer, but Italy, as a nation, really need Balotelli to start finding his feet. While a regular under Prandelli, the man with 13 goals in 33 caps has yet to appear under new boss Antonio Conte. And the latter is going to take some convincing to change that scenario.

Conte is a Coach who rules with an iron fist, a man who insists that talent is not enough. He wants disciples who are ready to fight, players committed to a shirt and a cause. That has been evident in his games in charge so far. Despite the fact that Balotelli is probably the peninsula's most talented attacker, Conte has instead opted to go with the likes of Simone Zaza, Ciro Immobile and Graziano

Pelle. They are not the most gifted generation of Italian attackers, but their off-the-ball work rate is something which Balotelli will do well to learn from.

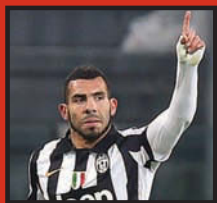
"IT'LL BE UP TO THE PLAYER NOW TO PROVE HIS WORTH TO ME, BUT I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME AND I NEED CERTAIN THINGS."

"I'm not so arrogant as to claim that I'm different from the great Coaches, but the past tells me that they have failed to change Balotelli," warned Conte. "It'll be up to the player now to prove his worth to me, but I don't have much time and I need certain things." What Liverpool and Italy require is fundamentally the same detail. They need a myth to transform into reality. And there is only one man who can ultimately do that – Mario Balotelli himself. The sooner he realises that then the better for all concerned. Potential has got him this far, but it won't take him much further.



FOOTBALL'S BAD BOYS

Those players like Mario Balotelli who, despite their complex character, are still some of the most exciting and talented to watch...



Carlos Tevez
Juventus and Argentina

He didn't endure the most blissful marriage with Manchester City. After unsuccessfully asking to be sold on at least two occasions, he was suspended after allegedly refusing to come on as a substitute against Bayern Munich. Having joined Juventus with a reputation as a difficult character, he's been on his best behaviour - as well as regularly on the scoresheet.



Wayne Rooney
Man Utd and England

An aggressive playing style coupled with his two red cards for England earlier in his career had seen Rooney heavily criticised. There is no doubting the guy's skill though and he's matured well in recent years.



Luis Suarez
Barcelona and Uruguay

Despite the fact that he's bitten three players, blatantly handled in a World Cup quarter-final and charged with racially abusing Patrice Evra, there is no doubt about his quality in front of goal. That's why Barcelona paid a massive €94m for him from Liverpool in the summer.



Pepe
Real Madrid and Portugal

Mr Hot Head himself, Pepe is accustomed for losing his cool for club or country on whatever stage. His needless confrontation with Thomas Muller at the 2014 World Cup was symptomatic of a career plagued by indiscipline - but he's still given roles by Real and Portugal.



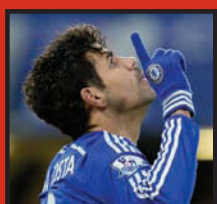
Zlatan Ibrahimovic
Paris SG and Sweden

A player who has physically hit out at teammates, slapped opponents, criticised Coaches and broken curfews, Ibra doesn't rank himself as a bad boy. What isn't up for discussion is the ability he has which has secured moves to the likes of Juventus, Inter, Barcelona, Milan and Paris Saint-Germain.



Felipe Melo
Galatasaray and Brazil

"I'm a Pit-bull. I run, I chase down opponents and I bite." No, not Luis Suarez, but key Galatasaray midfielder Felipe Melo. You don't want to mess with the Brazilian on or off the field. Formerly of Italian giants Juventus, he was famously dismissed for Brazil in World Cup 2010 for a stamp on Arjen Robben. Ouch!



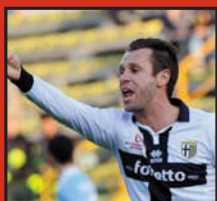
Diego Costa
Chelsea and Spain

A man monster, the Spanish international is an old school centre-forward who has been criticised for his aggressive play. He'll square up to just about anyone and his stamp on Emre Can earned him a three-match ban. But where would Chelsea be without his goals?



Sergio Ramos
Real Madrid and Spain

A fine defender on his day, but Sergio Ramos' biggest problem is his indiscipline. No player has been sent off as many times in La Liga, while he has over 100 yellows to his name. The boy is still a bit special though.



Antonio Cassano
Free Agent

He's not enjoyed the kind of career that his talent suggested he would have. Tipped to be the next great Italian No 10 while a teen, Cassano's combustible character meant he was always an argument away from controversy. A wasted talent which Mario Balotelli should pay attention to.

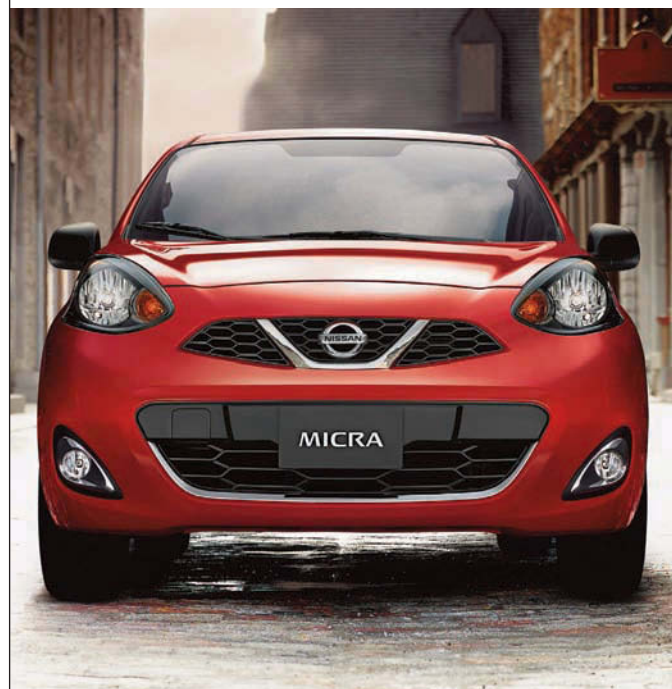


Pablo Daniel Osvaldo
Boca Juniors and Italy

Can anyone tame this man? A decent international striker, he's never spent more than two seasons at the same club. Left Roma after being critical of the outfit and their fans, his move to Southampton was a horror show and Inter dumped him after just six months. Now on loan with Boca Juniors.



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HAZARD SIGNS NEW CONTRACT

Chelsea winger Eden Hazard has signed a new five year deal with the club worth around £200,000 per week. Hazard has been in fine form this season as Chelsea look to win the title, and the player claims he wants to stay a long time with the club and win more trophies for the fans who support him.



YAYA TO MACC?

Conference side Macclesfield Town tweeted on transfer deadline day, "We are working on one big deal", followed by a picture of a cake with 'Happy Birthday Yaya' written on it. Poking fun at the saga that involved Toure taking offence to his birthday not being recognised by City last year. Worth a try!

BY THE NUMBERS

44 Since the Premier League began in the 1992-93 season there have been 62 promotions from the Championship. Of that number, 27 have been relegated at the first attempt - 44%

21 Since the play off system was introduced 28 years ago only 21 teams out of the last 85 to be relegated from the top flight have returned at the first attempt.

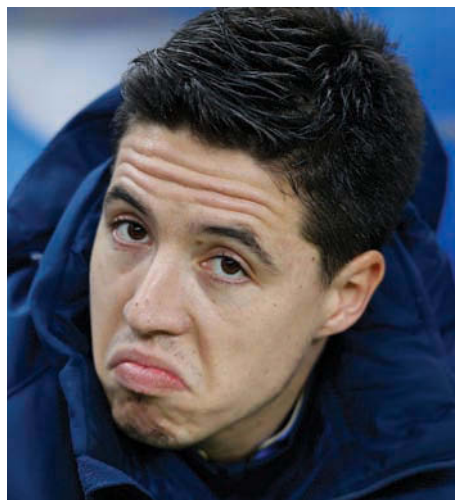


NO WARNING FOR WILSHERE

Arsenal midfielder Jack Wilshere was under fire after a picture of him smoking from a hookah pipe was uploaded to Instagram. But, no harm, no foul from England manager Roy Hodgson, who admitted he himself has tried shisha, saying it left "a faint fruity taste in the mouth," and not much else.

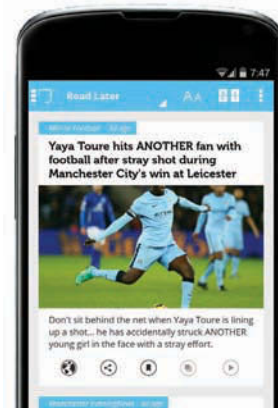
"YOU WANT TO CLEAR AND SIMPLE RULES FOR EVERYBODY TO UNDERSTAND [FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY]. IF I ASK 10 PEOPLE IN THE STREET TODAY, AND IF YOU ASK ME, I DON'T HAVE A CLEAR IDEA ANYMORE OF WHAT IT MEANS"

- Arsenal coach Arsène Wenger is perplexed by UEFA's FFP rules



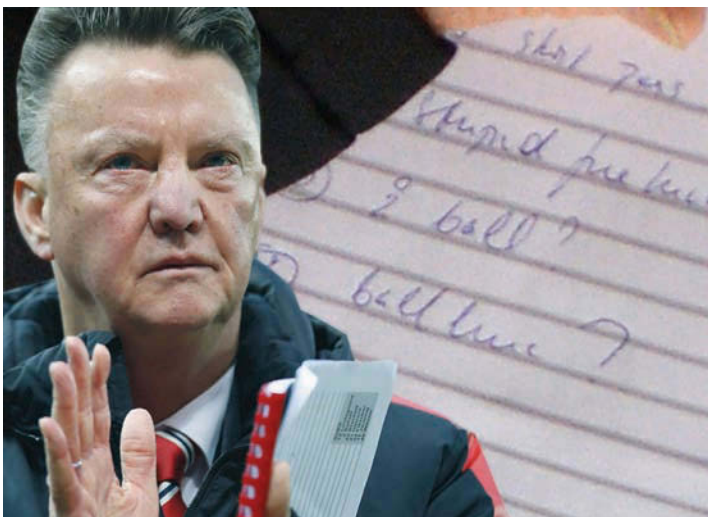
NOTHING SPECIAL

This year's Premier League title race has been hotly contested between Chelsea and Manchester City but Samir Nasri doesn't believe his side's opposition is that big a deal. Nasri said, "For me [Chelsea] are not special at all," and added, "I'm a big fan of Mourinho, but I am not impressed with his team, not at all."



MANCHESTER CITY OF THE FUTURE

We live in a strange, exciting new world of high tech gadgetry and gizmos, a world that Manchester City is paving inroads to with a new matchday app for wearable Android devices. That's right! You can now get official news and live scores right on your watch. What a time to be alive!



A LESSON IN TACTICS

It's no secret that Manchester United manager Louis Van Gaal is a tad theatrical in front of the media and the Dutchman didn't hold back when West Ham gaffer Sam Allardyce suggested that Man United play a long-ball style. Van Gaal pulled out the stat sheet, told reporters to copy it down and make sure Allardyce saw it.

NO CHIPS FOR YOU

Former Manchester United manager David Moyes revealed he had to ban French fries (or chips for those in the UK) from the team because the club had too many overweight players. No word on whether onion rings survived Moyes' ban hammer.





Benoit Assou-Ekotto 
@AssouEkotto

Official Twitter of benoit assou-ekotto
LOL your life!

FREE AT LAST

Out of favour fullback Benoit Assou-Ekotto was released by Tottenham Hotspur recently, and the Cameroon international took the news better than one might expect, changing his Twitter picture to a graphic of a man, arms raised, and the word "FREEDOM" written on the bottom.

BY THE NUMBERS

200 Stoke City's Jonathan Walters hat-trick against Queens Park Rangers in Week 23 came on his 200th appearance for the club. The Irish striker in fact scored a 'perfect hat-trick', scoring with his right foot, left foot, and his head.

"THAT'S A CAMPAIGN, THAT'S A CLEAR CAMPAIGN. PEOPLE, PUNDITS, COMMENTATORS, COACHES FROM OTHER TEAMS, THEY REACT WITH CHELSEA IN A WAY THEY DON'T REACT TO OTHER TEAMS."

– José Mourinho, Chelsea manager, describes the conspiracy theory that earned him a fine and led him to shut off the press for ten days

BY THE NUMBERS

125 On the same weekend Jermain Defoe scored his 125th Premier league goal in Sunderland's victory over Burnley. The goal also meant that Defoe has scored in 14 consecutive Premier League seasons, still some way behind Ryan Giggs' 23 however.

DID YOU KNOW?

The stand out Week 23 fixture was undoubtedly the clash at Stamford Bridge between title rivals Chelsea and Manchester City. The contest reached a global audience of 650m viewers, eclipsing the 115m viewers who watched the Super Bowl XLIX.

26 television and commentary teams were on duty to assist in the global broadcasting of the fixture. That beats the record of 19 at Man City versus Man Utd in 2012.



TROUBLE AT OLD TRAFFORD

Manchester United has found itself in a bit of financial trouble this season, accumulating debt to the tune of €514.9 million due to a combination of a lack of Champions League football and a high wage bill. Still, the club's financial future isn't all doom and gloom, as a new TV deal and a top four finish will help the matter.



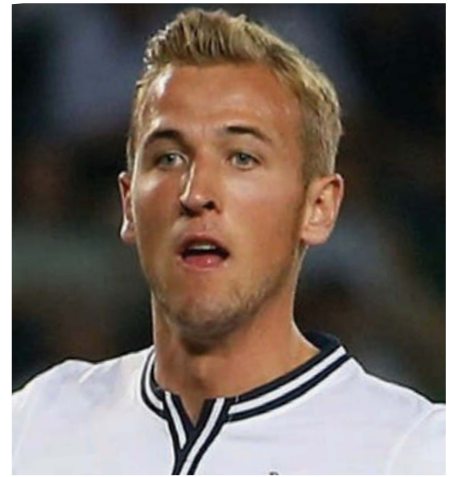
THE £5 BILLION EMPIRE

The English Premier League is, without doubt, the biggest football league in the world and with that status comes some big, big money, too. Sky Sports purchased the British TV rights to the EPL for a whopping £5,000,000,000 price tag, an incredible number for the sport we all love.

DID YOU KNOW?

Chelsea only had three shots on goal in the clash with Manchester City at Stamford Bridge in Week 23. That's the fewest they have managed in a Premier League game since 2003-04.

The top 10 fastest footballers on the planet have been revealed and five of the top 10 are Premier League based. Alexis Sanchez, Wayne Rooney, Theo Walcott, Aaron Lennon are all featured but are a way short of Manchester United's Antonio Valencia, who has reached up to 35.1kmph.

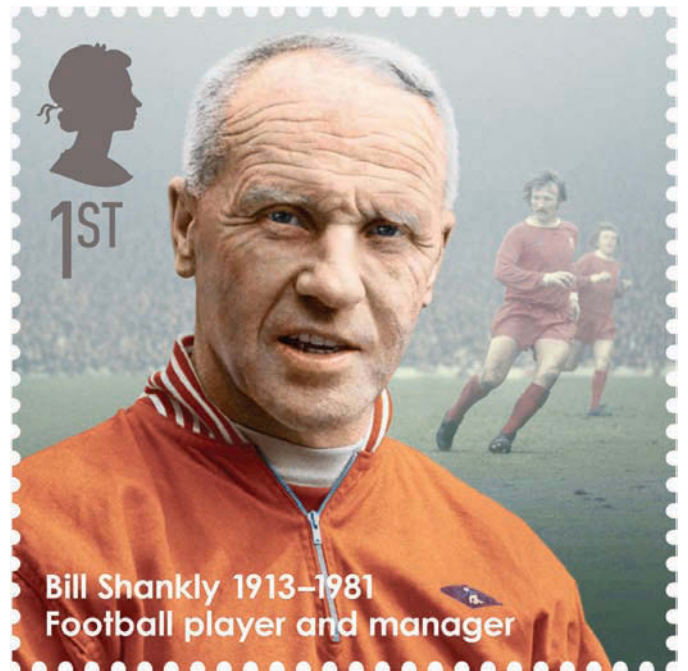


KANE YOU BELIEVE IT!

His rise from youth set-up to leading marksman has adhered Harry Kane to the White Hart Lane faithful. So much so that the Tottenham fans sing 'he's one of our own'. This was until pictures emerged of a young Mr Kane sporting an Arsenal shirt in his childhood days!

NO SCOTTISH MANAGERS LEFT

Paul Lambert was fired from Aston Villa in place of Tim Sherwood and, for the first time in 30 years, there are now no Scottish managers in the English Premier League. It's a shame, as the league has been the host of some of Scotland's finest, like Sir Alex Ferguson, Bill Shankly and Sir Matt Busby.



JOSE MOURINHO THE VILLAN

With Lambert's firing came the need to sign a new manager, and a young Aston Villa fan had the perfect solution. Six-year-old Jude Branson wrote to Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, asking that he come manage Aston Villa and "bring [Diego] Costa with you" too. Mourinho sent Branson a signed photo instead.



RED IS THE COLOUR

Noisy neighbours they may be but when it comes to shirt sales Manchester City are still behind rivals Manchester United. Reports are that 95 per cent of all football shirts sold in Manchester were those featuring the Red Devils' badge.



TROLLED!

Tottenham fans were left unimpressed when internet giant 'Google' used Spurs as an example in a sentence defining the word 'lackadaisical'. Type it in and up pops: 'A lackadaisical defence left Spurs adrift in the second half'.

lackadaisical | ləˈkɑːdɑːzɪkəl |

adjective

lacking enthusiasm and determination; carelessly lazy: *a lackadaisical defence left the Spurs adrift in the second half.*

DERIVATIVES

lackadaisically adverb

ORIGIN mid 18th cent. (also in the sense '*feebly sentimental*'): from the archaic interjection *lackaday*, *lackadaisy* (see ALACK) + -ICAL.

FALCAO AGENT BLASTS VAN GAAL

Radamel Falcao's agent Jorge Mendes has blasted Manchester United manager Louis Van Gaal after the forward's lack of playing time this season. Mendes claimed that the situation would be different under old Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson, and that Falcao would be a guaranteed starter for any club in the world.



DID YOU KNOW?

14 Premier League clubs made it on to the recently revealed Deloitte Football Money League for the 2013-14 season. Manchester United are in second place behind Spanish giants Real Madrid with last season's English top four comfortably placed in the top 10.

After Alan Pardew's resignation as Newcastle United manager, Sam Allardyce is now the second longest serving manager in the English top flight. Although his tenure is still some 14 years and 9 months shorter than Arsene Wenger's Arsenal reign, which began in September 1996.

SHOOTING AT HOOPS

Sunderland boss Gus Poyet has added an unusual twist to his team's training sessions, installing a pair of basketball nets at the club's training grounds. The intention is to help improve his players' marking ability, amongst other skills.

"YOU COULD MAKE NOISE WITH MY SILENCE, BECAUSE YOU KNOW THE REASON FOR MY SILENCE. IT DEPENDS ON YOU. IF I WAS A JOURNALIST I COULD MAKE FROM SILENCE LOTS OF WORDS."

- Mourinho breaks his silence to give some helpful tips to assembled journalists

BY THE NUMBERS

11 Queens Park Rangers have lost their first 11 away games of the season, equalling the feat managed by the Liverpool side of 1953-54.

DID YOU KNOW?

Aston Villa and Everton have both endured very poor seasons so far and are both languishing towards the wrong end of the table. They are among seven clubs to have never been relegated from the English Premier League. The others are Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham.

Arsenal's great start to 2015 has seen them climb back up the table but are we seeing a new, clinical, Gunners team? Their brilliant 2-0 win at Manchester City's Etihad Stadium saw them victorious but with only 35 per cent of the possession, their lowest count since Opta records began in 2003.



JOVETIC LASHES OUT

Out of favour Manchester City forward Stevan Jovetic pulled no punches after being replaced by Wilfried Bony in the team's Champions League roster, telling reporters the decision has "killed" him, adding that manager Manuel Pellegrini made the wrong choice. Jovetic will likely depart the club if the situation doesn't change.

BY THE NUMBERS

17 West ham's 2-0 defeat to Liverpool at Anfield recently, meant they haven't kept a clean sheet in 17 successive away games.

5 Everton ended a run of 5 straight away defeats with their 1-0 victory away at Crystal Palace.



RODGERS: STERLING OFFERED “INCREDIBLE” DEAL

Liverpool boss Brendan Rodgers has said the club have offered young winger Raheem Sterling an “incredible” deal. Sterling has postured over signing a new deal, with rumoured interest from Real Madrid and Chelsea, and the club want to get it sorted out as soon as possible.



HE NEVER!

Phil Neville got himself in hot water recently for his stance on Tomas Rosicky’s showboating in Arsenal’s recent FA Cup victory at Brighton: “If somebody did that in training to me, winding me up, I would be straight in there. I’d smash them.” Neville got a warning and claimed his comments were ‘tongue in cheek’.



A NEW HOPE

It seems once per season, a young English striker emerges and is instantly compared to all the greats before him; this season, it’s Tottenham forward Harry Kane, whose club form has been so impressive that he has landed an England call up for it, too! The 21-year-old has scored 23 goals in 35 games for Spurs this season.

“I BLAME THE PHOTOGRAPHER. IT’S YOUR JOB TO MAKE HIM SMILE. I’LL CHANGE THE PHOTOGRAPHER”

– Everton coach Roberto Martinez jokes after new signing Aaron Lennon was pictured looking less-than-happy while holding the club shirt



NO LOO’SERS HERE

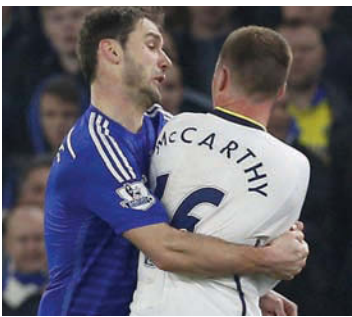
After their impressive draw at home to Manchester United in the FA Cup, Cambridge United netted a cool £1.5m in prize and gate money. Can fans expect a new striker and fast winger? Chairman Dave Dogget has other ideas: “It’s fair to say our toilets are quite bad so we certainly should be able to provide everyone with better ones now.”

BY THE NUMBERS

11 No team in the English top-flight history has scored fewer goals than the 11 that Aston Villa have managed in their opening 23 games this season.

LEARNING FOR LUIS SUAREZ

Remember, a few years ago, when Luis Suarez first took a chomp at Chelsea right fullback Branislav Ivanovic? It seems the Serbian defender learned a trick or two from the Uruguayan, as Ivanovic dolled out what looked like a bite of his own against Everton’s James McCarthy!



HOOPS-A-DAISY

Chelsea’s action packed Capital One Cup semi-final clash against Liverpool was obviously too much for Niall Quinn. The former Ireland striker and now television summariser accidentally referred to the Blues as ‘Celtic’ during his commentary duties.



HE’S LOYAL!

After his recent £25m move to Manchester City, Wilfried Bony surprised reporters when he claimed he had ‘dreamt of playing for City for 15 years’. Well, 15 years ago, Manchester City were playing in League One against the likes of Colchester United, Wilfried!

“I NEED IMMEDIATE SURGERY ON MY KNEE WHICH IS GOING TO STOP ME FROM DOING MY JOB IN THE COMING WEEKS. IT MEANS I WON’T BE ABLE TO BE OUT ON THE TRAINING PITCH EVERY DAY, AND IF I CAN’T GIVE 100% I FEEL IT’S BETTER FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO TAKE OVER THE REINS.”

– Harry Redknapp explains his decision to resign from the QPR job, coincidentally just days after the transfer window closed without landing any of his targets

INTER-TWINED WITH GERMANS

LUKAS PODOLSKI'S MOVE TO INTER HAS RICHARD HALL REMINISCING OF THE NERAZZURRI'S PARTICULAR RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE YEARS WITH GERMAN INTERNATIONALS.

When Lukas Podolski arrived in Milan's Linate Airport this January, he ended a 22-year separation between Inter and German international players. More than a habit, it perhaps is in fact a love affair, one that began with Horst Szymaniakin 1963 and until Podolski's arrival, had ended with Matthias Sammer in 1993. The latter's exit perhaps tainted the memory of these Teutonic warriors for the manner of his departure, but it certainly did not erase the impact of the Nerazzurri's favourite German trio - Lothar Matthäus, Andreas Brehme and Jürgen Klinsmann.

A young Lukas Podolski moved from Poland at only two years of age to spend his childhood in Bergheim, North Rhine-Westphalia, near to Cologne. Aged only five, he would not have been too aware of Italia 90 and the national team he would go on to choose to represent years later, but it was a moment in footballing history that earmarked both West Germany's dominance at international level, and Serie A's hold on the world's best at club level. Italia 90's German squad was strong, powerful and dynamic and, with their iconic black and white kit with the West German flag adorned across the chest, it was easy to see why they would capture the imagination. The team's most admired three players that were instrumental in their tournament victory that summer were Matthäus, Brehme and Klinsmann and, playing on Italian soil, all were at the tournament as Inter players. Key to the Nerazzurri, this trio helped orchestrate an iconic World Cup win under the lights of Italy's most impressive stadiums, where they plied their trade for an Inter side they would leave a lasting impact on.

Horst Szymaniak started Inter's affair with German players back in 1963 before being followed by Hans Müller and of course Karl-Heinz Rummenigge in the 1980s. By the time Matthäus and Brehme arrived from Bayern Munich in 1988, much was expected from them and they quickly delivered, winning the Scudetto in 1988-89 and the Supercoppa Italiana of the same year.

Matthäus was an outstanding midfielder and had power, pace, and a devastating shot. This goal-scoring central player was the engine room for the Nerazzurri and could change a game on his own. He was two footed, could dictate the play and create from nothing just as easily as he could form and lead a counter attack at will. His goal scoring, especially his penchant for the spectacular, was perhaps his greatest asset and he netted 40 goals in 115 appearances over four seasons. A spectacular return for a central midfielder but even more impressive when the goals he scored were often so crucial. Brehme, who had also arrived as part of the same deal, was brought in to play in a role we do not often see today. He would play in a deep laying left wing-back role that operated in front of a back three and just

Top Right (Opposite Page).

Matthias Sammer didn't compromise on the pitch or off it. Perhaps what made him a great defender but also cost him a career in Serie A.

"HE STANDS TO BE AN INTEGRAL PART OF INTER'S NEW DYNAMIC"

Below

Podolski offers work rate and ability out wide, to have certainly helped change Inter's attacking dynamic.

behind the deep lying midfielder. That there was no counter-part on the right was mainly due to Matthäus' engine and ability to cover that opposite side.

In his unique role, Brehme quickly became an integral part of Giovanni Trapattoni's side and his pace, power and dead ball specialities saw him play 116 times over four seasons whilst picking up 11 goals. One of the best players in his position for his time, the German international left-back could switch easily to midfield, with this flexibility allowing for an integral role during his stay in Italy.

A year after Andreas and Lothar had signed for Inter another German appeared. Klinsmann, German Footballer of the Year in 1988, joined his compatriots at San Siro after signing from VfB Stuttgart and made an instant impact. The then 25-year-old striker threw himself into life in Italy and learnt the language quickly. He was popular with the local population and integrated well on and off the pitch, whilst his lanky frame and gazelle like running made him strange to watch but his finishing ability was second to none and 13 goals in his first season was impressive. The Nerazzurri went on to win the 1991 UEFA Cup with their German trio and became the embodiment to what it meant to be 'Inter' at this time. Their status was lifted by a rivalry with Dutch trio Marco van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard, who played for city rivals Milan. The Giuseppe Meazza became home for some epic derby games and of course the 1990 World Cup Round of 16 meeting that saw the Dutch fall to their German rivals.



Matthäus, Klinsmann and Brehme's respective careers at Inter ended almost as soon as they had begun, with all three departing during 1992. However, in their three-and-four-year stints, they had left a magical image of just what the Nerazzurri could produce with a Teutonic influence of technique and determination behind it. It is a tradition that has remained ingrained and one that in Podolski's 2015 arrival, has the chance to be reignited.

Podolski is certainly versatile in a manner comparable to Brehme and, whilst his preference is for central play, he looks likely to spend his early Inter career out on the left-hand-side of attack, opposite Xherdan Shaqiri, to complement Coach Roberto Mancini's 4-2-3-1.

The ex-Cologne and Bayern man will need to prove his critics wrong, after difficulties in

DID YOU KNOW?

Podolski scored 32 goals in 64 appearances in the 2010/12 seasons.



Podolski was born in Gilwice, Poland. However, at the age of two, his family moved to Germany where he gained 'right of return' due to his grandparents having Germany Citizenship prior to WW2.

Podolski has 6 trophies, including a World Cup. Making his market value over 20 million euros.



Bottom Right (Opposite Page).

Happy times in Milan and high hopes. Matthäus, Klinsmann and Brehme formed a formidable trio that reaped the rewards during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

GERMANS GOOD & BAD AT INTER

Lothar Matthäus, Andreas Brehme and Jürgen Klinsmann are Inter's most memorable Germans, but Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and Matthias Sammer also had notable, albeit different impacts at San Siro.

Twice named European Footballer of the year, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge arrived at Inter for the 1984-85 season for what was thought to be the second highest transfer fee at that time. The German was plagued by injury during his time at San Siro but when he was on the field he was electric.

The big name signing was brought into a bright young squad coached by Ilario Castagner. The team featured a talented mix of Walter Zenga, Riccardo Ferri, Liam Brady, Giuseppe Bergomi and Alessandro Altobelli. Despite this promising squad the team failed to win any silverware in Rummenigge's time there, but his influence was still great.

If the German had stayed fit, according to Coach Giovanni Trapattoni, then his 1986-87 Inter team would have managed to win the Scudetto instead of finishing third. Altobelli also agreed in stating that without Rummenigge in the team they simply 'lost the plot'.

The German was strong, charismatic and had a presence on and off the pitch. Not only was he sublimely capable on the ball but he could pick out a pass superbly well and his long range shooting was exemplary. He was an all-round midfielder capable of scoring any manner of goal, even from headers.

His influence has been felt as recently as the 2015 winter transfer window as CEO of Bayern Munich, where he did much to help the transfer of Xherdan Shaqiri go through. It is advice and influence that even today makes him a favourite in Milan.

The last German before Podolski to don the black and blue shirt of Inter was Matthias Sammer. He arrived on the back of Matthäus, Klinsmann and Brehme departing and it was thought he would carry the torch passed over from his countryman.

The fact that Sammer refers to his time in Milan as 'the worst of my life' perhaps lets you in on the fact that his time there did not work out well. There were two main factors that hampered his progress whilst he was in Italy and it ultimately meant that by 1993 he was back in his homeland.

Sammer firstly could not adapt to the lifestyle in Italy and also did little to help himself. Whereas Klinsmann had tried hard to learn the language and adapt to Milanese culture Sammer did not.

The player joined from VfB Stuttgart with the idea that he was an dynamic midfielder. He had scored 20 goals in 63 appearances for his club and with Inter being restructured, it was assumed he would take an influential role in the middle of the park. The club were in transition and alongside the German was Uruguayan Ruben Sosa, Russian playmaker Igor Shalimov, promising Yugoslav Darko Pancev and a certain Salvatore Schillaci, who had left so many people with so many fantastic memories after Italia 90 came in.

They had enough attacking prowess to take the team forward, but Sammer ended up embroiled in arguments about playing in a defensive midfield role. It was an argument he lost and it ultimately ended his career in Serie A.

England with Arsenal, but the stats from his time in London suggest that he will. A tally of 19 goals and 11 assists in 60 appearances is a steady record to offer Inter, whilst his passing accuracy has averaged 82.4 per cent since 2009, whilst in eight Champions League appearances he has eight goals.

Put into context, Podolski touches down in Italy looking to prove those statistics right and Arsene Wenger wrong. Whether along the way he can emulate the great Germanic talent that has graced the Giuseppe Meazza before is still to be seen, but if Mancini's team reach Europe or can win the Coppa Italia, then why not? He stands to be an integral part of Inter's new dynamic and a look back at illustrious predecessors will give him enough motivation to reignite this sleeping giant.



Factfile
Name: Lukas Josef Podolski
Born: June 4, 1985 (Gliwice, Poland)
Ht / Wt: 1.82m / 93kg
Position: Left wing/2nd Striker/Forward
Club: Inter

Club stats			
Season	Club	Apps	Goals
2003-04	FC Cologne	19	10
2004-05	FC Cologne	30	24
2005-06	FC Cologne	32	12
2006-07	Bayern Munich	22	4
2007-08	Bayern Munich	25	5
2008-09	Bayern Munich	24	6
2009-10	FC Cologne	27	2
2010-11	FC Cologne	32	13
2011-12	FC Cologne	29	18
2012-13	Arsenal	33	11
2013-14	Arsenal	20	8
2014-15	Arsenal	6	-
2014-15	Inter	5	-

International stats		
Year	Apps	Goals
2004	8	2
2005	12	8
2006	17	12
2007	7	2
2008	16	7
2009	9	6
2010	14	5
2011	12	1
2012	11	1
2013	5	2
2014	9	1



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RETURNING HEROES: CERCIO

CERCIO'S NEXT CHANCE

AFTER SIX DISAPPOINTING MONTHS AT ATLETICO MADRID, ALESSIO CERCIO BACKTRACKED TO SERIE A AND MILAN. SUSY CAMPANALE WONDERS IF THE EX-TORINO MAN'S PERSONALITY WILL AGAIN STALL HIS CAREER.



Above. Alessio Cerci is hoping to revive his career yet again at Milan after failing to make an impact with Atletico Madrid

"Cerci came to say hello to everyone in the locker room after the game and I told him: 'Dear Alessio, you're an idiot. You should never have left Torino'. He said I was right. We were joking, but not that much..." The anecdote from Granata President Urbano Cairo after Milan's 1-1 draw in Turin sums up the career path of Alessio Cerci over the past six months, as he went from big fish in a small pond to drowning tiddler in the Atletico Madrid lake. Now he's back in Italy at Milan and hoping to rediscover his confidence. It was not entirely unpredictable. This isn't the first time that Cerci has seen his champion credentials called into question. A Roma youth product, he has been known to get into rows with Coaches, teammates and supporters. Never entirely loved at Fiorentina even after strong performances, he famously said he'd: "never go under the Curva with the fans. The same people insulted me in the street and called me arrogant, then changed their tune when results got better. I wanted to see how they'd behave the moment results took another turn for the worse. I didn't believe their compliments."

Cerci found his form at Torino under Giampiero Ventura. The veteran Coach had already worked with him at Pisa and knew how to handle the temperamental winger, turning him into an Italy international. "I read for months that he couldn't play as a support striker, but he proved them all wrong. Cerci is a universal player," insisted Ventura. The 2013-14 campaign was without doubt his best ever season, scoring 13 Serie A goals whereas he'd never gone into double figures in his career before that, plus 10 assists that helped make teammate Ciro Immobile Capocannoniere. The native Roman finally seemed at home in Turin, even getting a tattoo on his chest that read: '13-04-14 47:47 2T'. It represented the date and the moment of the match in which he scored against Genoa to decide a crucial Torino victory.

As is so often the case, a player who finally proves his quality can't wait to up sticks and move elsewhere, giving himself no chance of consistency. Cerci's girlfriend didn't exactly help make it a smooth exit from Torino, posting a Twitter message declaring: "We're going into the football that really counts." Toro fans referenced it with a banner when he returned on the Milan bench: 'Welcome back to the football that counts for nothing'. Even at the age of 27, Cerci perhaps realised during six frustrating months in Spain that he's just not ready to feel like one of the crowd: "I was a protagonist at Torino. I lost patience on the bench at Atletico." When he did get on to the field, the problems emerged yet again, as he managed to get himself sent off in one of only six Liga appearances against Valencia. He spent 24 minutes on the pitch that day and received two bookings. The sum total of his Atleti career was just 249 minutes of football in all competitions, resulting in one goal, one assist and one red card.

He gave up on breaking into Diego Simeone's side and accepted an exchange of 18-month loans with fellow outcast Fernando Torres: "It was important for me to come back to



Italy. I've already spoken with Coach Filippo Inzaghi. I took a long route, but it's what I wanted in the summer. Having come to Milan is important, it's a point of arrival."

It is true to say Cerci had already been on the verge of joining the Rossoneri when he left Torino for €16m on transfer deadline day, but as Cairo confirmed: "they didn't feel prepared to pay that amount. Basically he came to Milan six months late."

There are several reasons why Milan was always meant to be his destination and he failed so spectacularly in Madrid, not making a single Liga start under Simeone. It seemed an odd move in the first place, as Atleti aren't exactly known for their width, so he was an added alternative to their system rather than a necessary purchase. The Rossoneri have been trying to play 4-3-3 for some time, a tactic Fernando Torres just did not fit into either, but which would suit Cerci perfectly.

"It's my fault," confessed Cerci. "When you're at a club where things are going so well it's difficult to displace players. I tried to change the Coach's mind, but I didn't succeed. In football that's always the most important thing, that you have the esteem of the club, the Coach, the doctors - everyone. I now have a Coach who is crazy about me, that just doesn't happen in football today. I'm in the best position I could possibly be to express myself to the fullest. I thank the Coach for his beautiful words, now I have to perform. I have to do what I know I can, the things for which I was brought here."

Simeone had already hinted at the problems before Cerci's return to Italy, noting he: "never understood players who complain to the media rather than try to prove themselves in training. The best thing that could happen to him is to return into a great team like Milan. Now he'll be able to bring out everything that's best in him." Again, that's not new behaviour for the Italian, as revealed by Torino director Gianluca Petrachi: "What happened in Madrid was clear for all to see. This lad needs to find the right environment in order to give his best. He's a good guy, but like many talented players

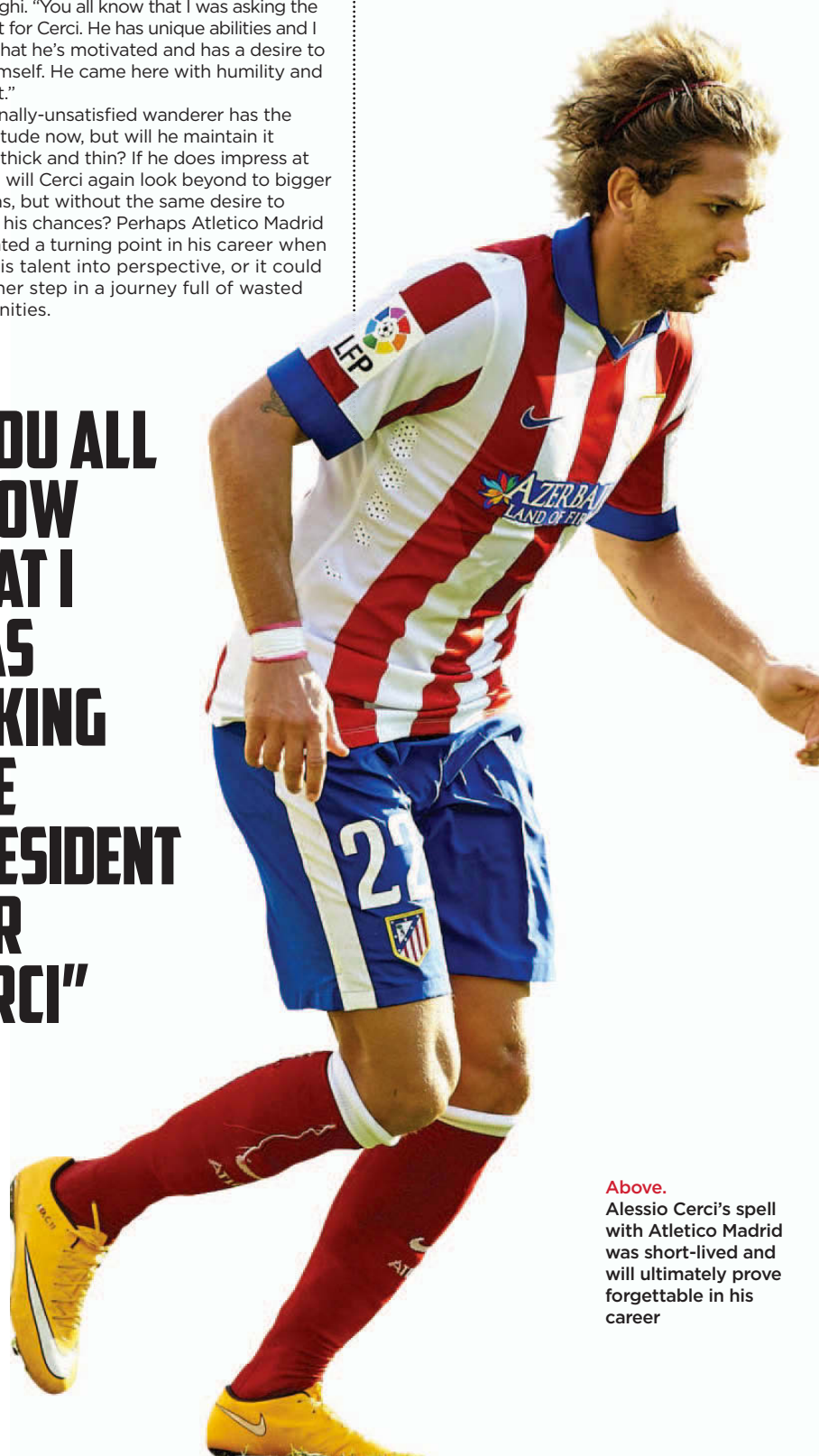
Above. Torino President Urbano Cairo told Alessio Cerci he 'was an idiot' for leaving the Granata last summer

has some limitations in his personality which means he is not a champion. He needs to be motivated in order to give his best, whereas a champion will spur himself on to always do better and seek perfection. Cerci needs to be constantly reminded that if he trains well, then he can get that muscular power and pace that allows him to be devastating in the final third. If he doesn't do that, then he becomes simply a normal player. Unfortunately he's a bit lazy in that sense and needs to be motivated again and again."

The perfect example of Cerci's half-hearted approach to training was seen in a Vine clip that went viral. Needing to lift his leg over a knee-high obstacle, he swung far too low and kicked it into the air. It was accompanied by the caption: 'The best thing Cerci did at Atleti'. You might be able to get away with that in some clubs, but Simeone's hard-working Colchoneros definitely won't stand for it. There can be some positives from the dismal spell in Spain, as Cerci confesses he has: "become a better player because of what happened in Madrid." Perhaps this culture shock has shown the inconsistent talent that he needs to knuckle down and work hard, repaying the obvious faith new Coach Inzaghi has in him. Milan are sending out all the right signals to make the fragile ego feel coddled in his new environment. "Since the summer my priority was Cerci," said Inzaghi. "You all know that I was asking the President for Cerci. He has unique abilities and I can see that he's motivated and has a desire to prove himself. He came here with humility and I like that."

The eternally-unsatisfied wanderer has the right attitude now, but will he maintain it through thick and thin? If he does impress at San Siro, will Cerci again look beyond to bigger ambitions, but without the same desire to work for his chances? Perhaps Atletico Madrid represented a turning point in his career when he put his talent into perspective, or it could be another step in a journey full of wasted opportunities.

"YOU ALL
KNOW
THAT I
WAS
ASKING
THE
PRESIDENT
FOR
CERCI"



Above.
Alessio Cerci's spell with Atletico Madrid was short-lived and will ultimately prove forgettable in his career

Factfile
Name: Alessio Cerci
Born: July 23, 1987 (Velletri, Italy)
Ht / Wt: 1.80m / 78kg
Position: Winger
Club: Milan

Club stats				
Season	Club	Apps	Goals	
2003-04	Roma	1	-	
2004-05	Roma	2	-	
2005-06	Roma	1	-	
2006-07	Brescia	21	-	
2007-08	Pisa	26	10	
2008-09	Atalanta	13	-	
2009-10	Roma	9	-	
2010-11	Fiorentina	24	7	
2011-12	Fiorentina	23	5	
2012-13	Torino	35	8	
2013-14	Torino	37	13	
2014	Atletico Madrid	6	-	
Jan 2015	Milan	3	-	

International stats		
Year	Apps	Goals
2013	9	-
2014	5	-
2015	-	-

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SIMPLY Divine

HE WAS FAR AND AWAY THE BEST ITALIAN PLAYER OF HIS GENERATION YET HE NEVER REALLY GOT THE GLOBAL CREDIT HE DESERVED. BUT GIANCARLO RINALDI RECKONS ROBERTO BAGGIO EARNED HIS PLACE AMONG SOCCER'S DEITIES.

There was a point when we feared he might not have a career at all. Serious injury and a fragile-looking physique meant Roberto Baggio's days as a professional risked being compromised before they had seriously started. Thankfully – for both the player and millions of spectators down the years – he had the inner fortitude to overcome the obstacles which others might have found insurmountable.

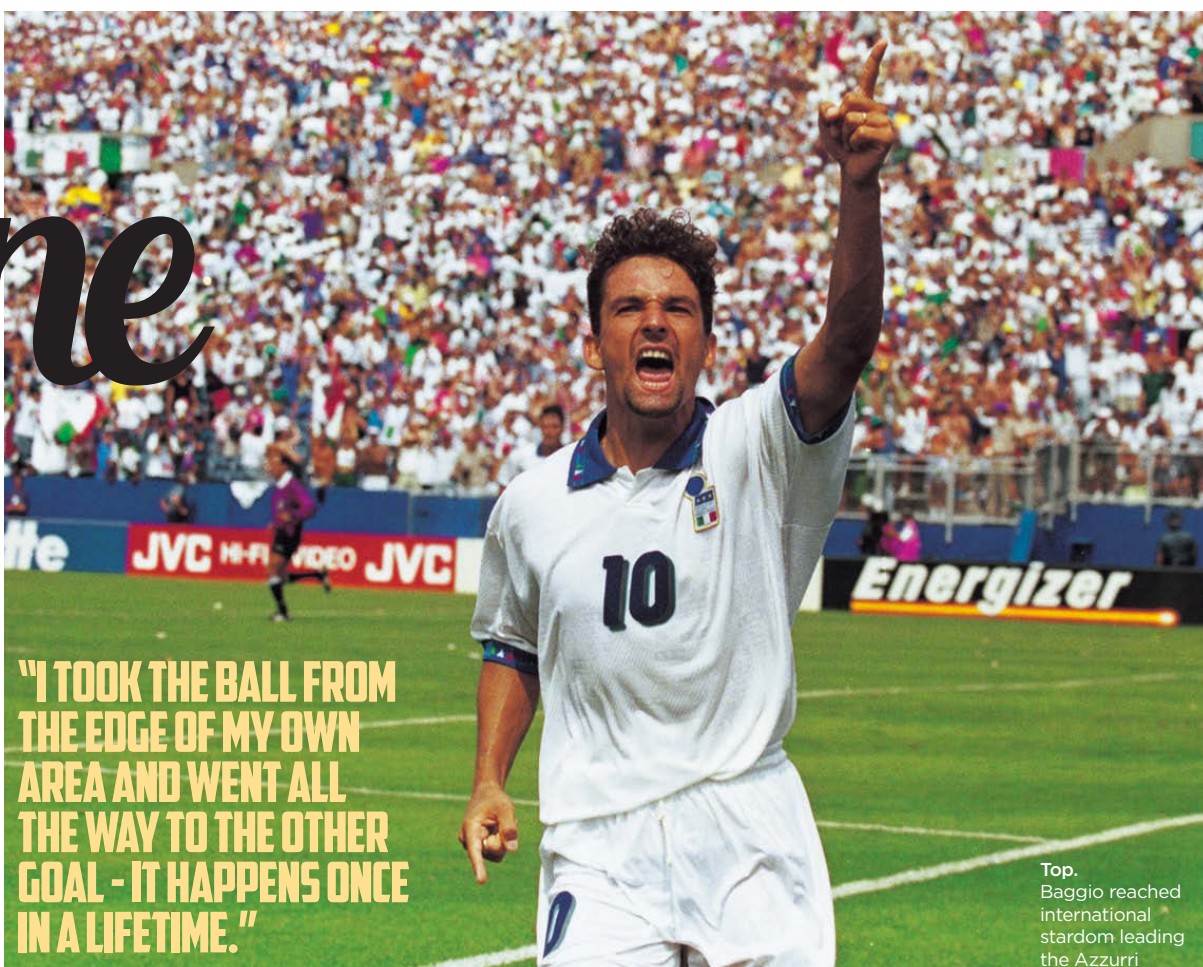
The story begins about a 15-minute drive from his hometown of Caldogno, at Vicenza in the third tier of Italian football. After scoring countless goals for their youth sides, he made his first team debut at the age of 16 in the final game of the 1982-83 season when Coach Bruno Mazzia sent him on to replace future Atalanta stalwart Carlo Perrone. But it would take another full season before he would really start to bloom. "I can remember that first season well," he would later recall. "I was just 16 and I almost used the polite form of speech to my older teammates." Under Bruno Giorgi – who would also manage him at Fiorentina – the youngster began to play a more and more prominent role. His goals were vital in helping the Biancorossi make a successful promotion push into Serie B. He was widely recognised as one of the best players in the Division which made him a hot property. It would be the Viola of Florence who would outsprint their rivals to secure his services.

Yet many clubs would have welched on the deal. Baggio picked up a serious injury – damaging the cruciate ligament of his right knee – in the closing stages of his Third Division campaign, just a couple of days after signing for his new club. "I was chasing down an opponent and I tried to slide in – I still did that back then, but after that incident I stopped," he recalled. "My leg bent under me and I felt an enormous pain in my knee. I came off and after that a long struggle began."

The Tuscan side might have walked away but, instead, they took a gamble and decided to stand by him through major surgery in the hope that he could deliver on the talent he had already started to show.

"I presented myself in Florence with crutches and in plaster," he said. "Everyone was a bit shocked."

Yet they showed the kind of patience hard to imagine nowadays as they lost their precious acquisition for the best part of two years. With the determination and professionalism which would characterise his career, he slowly but surely worked his way back to full fitness in order to reward the loyalty shown by his new employers. But then, no sooner had he returned to action, than his right knee gave way again. "I thought a bad time was behind me but I was wrong," he admitted. Further surgery ensued and it was not until 1987, that the now 20-year-old was ready to explode on the Serie A scene.



Top. Baggio reached international stardom leading the Azzurri

"I TOOK THE BALL FROM THE EDGE OF MY OWN AREA AND WENT ALL THE WAY TO THE OTHER GOAL - IT HAPPENS ONCE IN A LIFETIME."

Far Right, (Opposite Page)

Whilst there were spells with Milan and Inter, it was with Italy's peripheral sides Bologna and then Brescia that Baggio found his best form, and his highest appreciation in Serie A

He quickly emerged as one of the most exciting talents in Italy, teaming up with hitman Stefano Borgonovo in the 1988-89 season to form a deadly double act. Baggio was the dribbler and assist-man par excellence with his teammate an exquisite finisher. The following campaign, with Borgogol returning to his parent club in Milan, even more pressure fell on the man he left behind. But the thrilling fantasista seemed to thrive.

One goal typified his play more than any other. On a visit to the San Paolo, the home of Napoli and a certain Diego Maradona, he scored a goal which even the maestro must have watched in admiration – swaying this way and that before rounding the 'keeper to score. It was an exhibition of balance, poise and composure which would become the hallmark of his career. "I took the ball from the edge of my own area and went all the way to the other goal," he remembered. "It happens once in a lifetime."

He also helped to drag a distinctly average-looking squad all the way to the UEFA Cup Final where they would lose out to arch-rivals Juventus. But the bitterness of that defeat was as nothing compared with the reaction when it emerged his current club had sold him to the Bianconeri. There was violence on the streets of Florence and numerous arrests as fans tried to come to terms with the fact that their idol had been sold to their worst enemy.

Despite all the ructions, Baggio took solace in La Nazionale. At Italia '90 he stepped on to the global stage with a glorious goal against Czechoslovakia which still gives goosebumps when you watch it replayed. It is hard not to be hypnotised by his one-two with Giuseppe Giannini, mazy run and beautifully cool finish. The Azzurri fell short at the semi-final stage with Argentina, but the boy who would become the Divine Ponytail was now a household name.

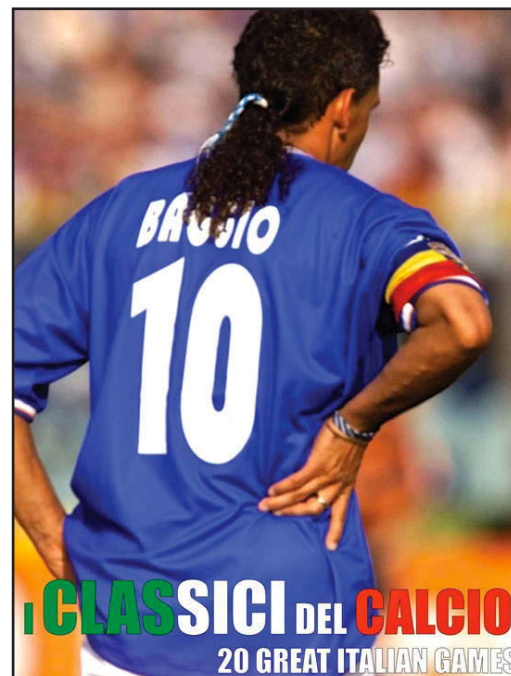
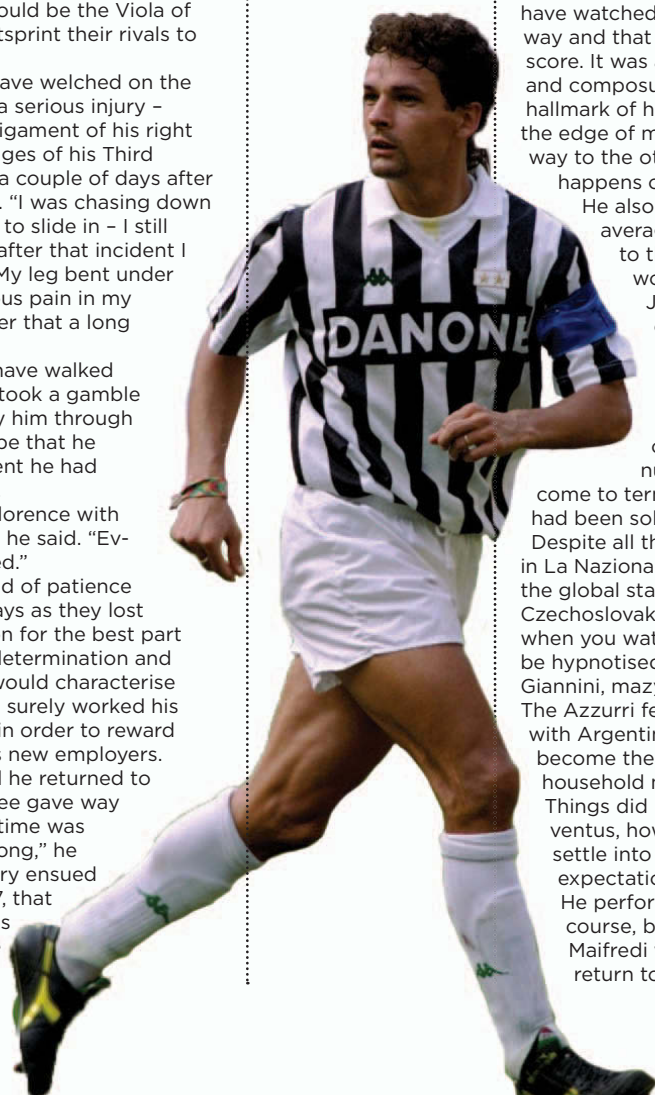
Things did not start so easily with Juventus, however. It took a little time to settle into his new surroundings and the expectation level was a notch higher. He performed more than creditably, of course, but the campaign under Gigi Maifredi would be most notable for his return to Florence in the spring of 1991

and a penalty kick which he declined to take, which was subsequently saved.

"If I had missed it they would have said I did it on purpose," he explained years later. "So to avoid that situation we decided the day before that Luigi De Agostini would take it. They called it a betrayal but a betrayal of what? Is a footballer not allowed to feel like not taking a penalty at a certain moment in time?"

For some Juventini it was hard to forgive but he did his best to win them over. The Scudetto remained elusive but he delivered a glorious UEFA Cup in 1993. Probably at about the peak of his playing powers, he was also recognised with the Ballon d'Or.

A year later, he used those same breathtaking skills to take Arrigo Sacchi's Italy by the scruff of the neck and to within a whisker of winning the World Cup in the USA. He threaded the eye of a needle with a late equaliser against Nigeria in the Last 16 and then delivered the penalty to knock them out. He scored again from a ludicrously narrow angle to see off Spain. And he struck twice in the semi-final to eliminate Bulgaria.



CLASSICI DEL CALCIO
20 GREAT ITALIAN GAMES

GIANCARLO RINALDI

But, carrying an injury, he was not quite the same force in the final with Brazil and ended up being most remembered for missing a penalty in the shootout.

"I usually take penalties differently than what happened that day," he said. "I usually took them along the ground or at least keeping them low. That day, however, it went too high."

His pain was only compounded with a more peripheral role at Juventus the following year. The arrival of Marcello Lippi and emergence of Alessandro Del Piero combined to make him a more marginal figure. After five epic seasons in black and white, he was on the move again. This time his destination was Milan but he would never quite recapture the magic he had shown before with the same consistency.

Many reckoned his career had gone into a downward spiral but two glorious swansongs proved that affirmation wrong. One dazzling season with Bologna was enough to convince Inter to take a chance on him but there, once again, he crossed paths with Lippi and it never worked out. However, in the twilight of his career he continued to delight and enchant over four years with Brescia. The pace had gone, of course, but the skills were still crystal clear. When he waved farewell in May 2004 at San Siro against Milan there were few who doubted they were saying goodbye to an exceptional player.

"I have been lucky," he told one interviewer. "But I've earned some of it too. I don't think everyone realises how hard I have had to work during my career. I'm talking about physical work, in the gym, long and boring exercises to keep the muscle toned and the rehabilitation after all the injuries I have had. People see you going on to the pitch but they only see the shell - not what is inside."

The outside of Roberto Baggio was a pretty special thing to behold. Few players had the pyrotechnic flair to light up the dullest match with an explosion of skill like he could. His grace, guile and goalscoring precision were a sheer joy to witness. But it was all held together by even greater interior strength - perhaps fuelled by his Buddhist beliefs. Where others might have fallen by the way-side, he drove himself on to become a true icon of the modern game.

Factfile

Name:

Roberto Baggio

Born:

Feb 18, 1967 (Italy)

Ht / Wt:

1.74m / 72kgs

Position:

Forward

Club stats			
Season	Club	Apps	Goals
1982-83	Vicenza	1	-
1983-84	Vicenza	6	1
1984-85	Vicenza	29	12
1985-86	Fiorentina	-	-
1986-87	Fiorentina	5	1
1987-88	Fiorentina	27	6
1988-89	Fiorentina	30	15
1989-90	Fiorentina	32	17
1990-91	Juventus	33	14
1991-92	Juventus	32	18
1992-93	Juventus	27	21
1993-94	Juventus	32	17
1994-95	Juventus	17	8
1995-96	Milan	28	7
1996-97	Milan	23	5
1997-98	Bologna	30	22
1998-99	Inter	23	5
1999-00	Inter	18	4
2000-01	Brescia	25	10
2001-02	Brescia	12	11
2002-03	Brescia	32	12
2003-04	Brescia	26	12

International stats		
Year	Apps	Goals
1988	1	-
1989	6	3
1990	9	4
1991	2	1
1992	7	6
1993	7	5
1994	12	5
1995	1	-
1997	2	1
1998	6	2
1999	2	-
2000	0	0
2004	1	-

A GREAT CHAMPION

"He was educated, respectful, punctual, hard-working and an example to everyone - and, on top of that, he helped us to win games. How could I say anything against him?" - Carlo Mazzone.

"I am very happy because at the end of my career I can say I played with Roby. My father is happy too" - Stephen Appiah.

"He had such a vast array of options that you have to say Baggio was a unique player who could not be compared with anyone." - Roberto Donadoni.

"It's a dream to play with your idol - I was lucky to play with him and Ronaldo. To be so young in a team full of champions was great for me." - Andrea Pirlo.

"When he went away with the ball at his feet you could expect anything because he could do everything." - Evaristo Becalossi.

"It was an extraordinary thing for me to have Roberto Baggio for the few months I had him at Inter." - Gigi Simoni.

"We are talking about a great champion - a reference point not just for Inter but for Italy and the whole football world." - Javier Zanetti.

"Baggio was a great player not just because of his extraordinary technical skills but also because of extraordinary physical qualities." - Serse Cosmi.

"It was better to attack him with his back to goal and try to make him play the ball backwards - if you let him run at you he was much more dangerous." - Ivan Cordoba.

MORE TALENT THAN TROPHIES

Nobody in Italy would dispute his ability but Roberto Baggio won fewer trophies than a player of his skills deserved to. His first significant team success was to help Vicenza win promotion to Serie B in 1985. During his time at Fiorentina, his most notable achievement was to play a part in finishing runners-up in the UEFA Cup 1989-90.

The transfer to Juventus finally brought some silverware and he was a central figure in the UEFA Cup triumph of 1992-93. It carried with it some global recognition as he was awarded the Ballon d'Or in the same year. It would be the pinnacle of his personal achievements in the game.

In 1994-95 he would complete the Coppa Italia and Scudetto double with Juventus although, in truth, he was something of a bit-part player in both competitions. He played a more significant role in another near-miss with the runners-up spot in the UEFA Cup in that same campaign.

He would enjoy back-to-back League championships as he played more matches than he had the previous season in contributing to Milan's Scudetto triumph of 1995-96. It would be the final major club trophy he would win.

With the national team, the closest he came to a title was that second place at USA '94. He was also part of the Azzurri side which finished third at Italia '90.

He was not part of the squads for the European Championships of 1996 or 2000 but would get the satisfaction of converting a penalty in the quarter-final shootout with France in the 1998 World Cup, even though Italy would be eliminated.

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EDERSON AWOL

Transfer deadline day has most people scrambling for the phone, but not Lazio midfielder Ederson. He refused to pick up when called by his club, Sampdoria directors and Blucerchiati Coach Sinisa Mihajlovic, scuppering a proposed swap with Gonzalo Bergessio.



CASSANO QUILTS NEW PARMA

Parma were taken over by Russian-Cypriot-Albanian investors in December and appointed 29-year-old President Ermir Kodra, but that hasn't solved all their financial problems. Antonio Cassano and Dias Felipe terminated their contracts by mutual consent in January, protesting nobody had received wages since July. "It takes more dignity to stay in the saddle than to quit," blasted Coach Roberto Donadoni. "People who think only of themselves are cowardly and hypocritical."

SEASON OVER

The season is already over for Lazio striker Filip Djordjevic, who broke his ankle during a 3-1 win over Milan in January. Roma midfielder Kevin Strootman suffered cartilage damage in the knee that underwent surgery last year, while Mattia De Sciglio is also expected to be out for the rest of the campaign after the Milan full-back tore the plantar fascia in his foot.



DON LOTITO, THE GODFATHER

Lazio president Claudio Lotito has caused some controversy after a phone call recording was leaked that had him disparaging smaller Italian clubs, lamenting the current system of promotion/relegation and bragging about power over others in the league. Lotito drew scorn from several other presidents, with Ischia president Pino Iodice saying Lotito used "Godfather language."

"I STILL LOVE THIS SPORT THE WAY I DID WHEN I WAS 15. WHEN I WAKE UP ONE DAY AND THAT'S NO LONGER THE CASE, I'LL RETIRE."

– At 35, Juventus midfielder Andrea Pirlo is well over the Juve average players age of 29, but nonetheless a starter for Italy's most successful club.

JUVE TOP RICH LIST

Juventus have again been named the richest club in Italy, but dropped from ninth to 10th in the world. Real Madrid were top for the 10th year running after generating €549.5m compared to the Bianconeri's €279.4m. Milan dropped out of the top 10 for the first time since the Deloitte Money League started and Napoli rose to 16th.

"WE NEED TO GET RID OF THE NEGATIVITY IN THE DRESSING ROOM. ONLY IF EVERYONE HELPS, THE PLAYERS ALONG WITH THE FANS, CAN WE BRING MILAN BACK TO A CALMER PLACE."

– Milan's Keisuke Honda has called on the club's fans to get behind them and help them turn around their form.

DID YOU KNOW?

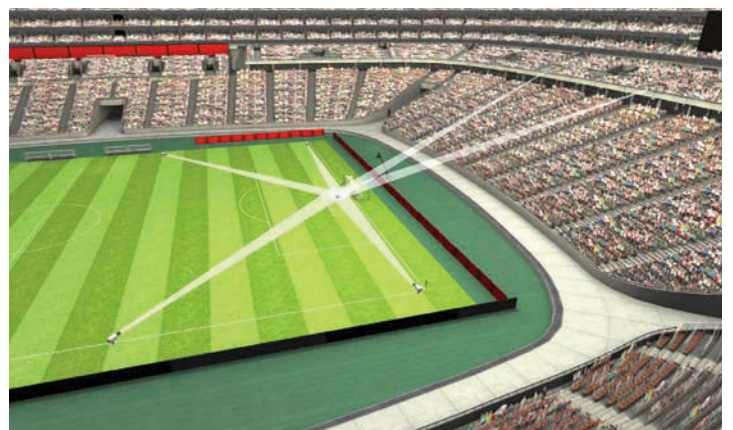
Juventus are Winter Champions for the 28th time and in 19 previous occasions – 70.3 per cent – have gone on to take the Scudetto.

From 2003-04 all the way to 2013-14, the side top at the midway stage has eventually won the Serie A title.

The last time Milan failed to win any of the first four games in a calendar year was 1941.

HAWKEYE LANDS IN ITALY

Serie A announced it will introduce goal-line technology from the 2015-16 campaign. This season there have been numerous 'phantom goal' incidents, whereas the Hawkeye system has already been used successfully in the 2014 World Cup and Premier League.



POGBA REPENTANCE

Paul Pogba joined Juventus as a free agent in 2012 and is now valued at €100m, but Manchester United aren't the only club with regrets around the French talent. Representative Mino Raiola reveals he offered Pogba to Milan, Inter and Roma before heading to Turin.



BY THE NUMBERS

17 Milan hadn't lost the first game of the year since a 3-0 demolition at Lazio in 1997, followed by 14 victories and three stalemates.



GUANGZHOU DUO AGAIN

Alberto Gilardino (pictured) and Alessandro Diamanti must feel like they're joined at the hip. The former Bologna teammates both moved to China for Guangzhou Evergrande in 2014 and have now returned to Serie A with Fiorentina.

BY THE NUMBERS

33 With 33 points this was the best first half to a Blucerchiati campaign since 35 in 1996-97.



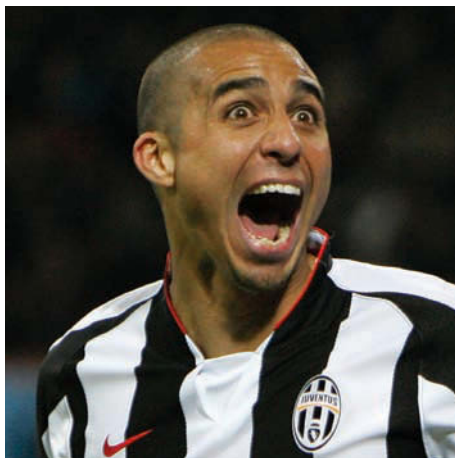
MEXES MADNESS

Philippe Mexes received a four-match ban after he was sent off against Lazio and then got captain Stefano Mauri in a choke-hold. This was the 16th red card of the Milan centre-back's career and he made a public apology: "I have four kids, so I know this is not the right example to set as a father or as a player. I have no excuses, as it's a football match and you cannot behave like that."

DID YOU KNOW?

Genoa went without a victory in the opening four Serie A games of the calendar year for the first time since 1992.

Before a 3-1 triumph in January, Juventus hadn't conquered Napoli at the San Paolo since a 2-1 result in September 2000, managing only three draws from eight visits between Serie A and B.



TREZEGUET RETURNS

David Trezeguet announced his retirement in January and confirmed negotiations to become a global ambassador for Juventus. The 37-year-old wore the Bianconeri jersey from 2000 to 2010, scoring 171 goals in 315 games, and remained with the Old Lady after demotion to Serie B in 2006. He went on to feature for Hercules, Baniyas, River Plate, Newell's Old Boys and Indian Super League team Pune City FC.

BY THE NUMBERS

12 Sampdoria were 12 points better off at the midway stage than last season, the most-improved team in the Division.

BY THE NUMBERS

9 For the first time ever in Serie A with three points for a win, there were two teams in single figures halfway through the season, as Parma and Cesena had only nine.



LAZIO GO OLD SCHOOL

In January Lazio unveiled their 'new' home kit, which is a copy of the one worn in 1986-87 when the club survived in Serie B despite a nine-point penalty for match-fixing. The Aquile avoided dropping into Serie C thanks to a three-way relegation play-off against Taranto and Campobasso. "That team overcame huge obstacles and allowed the fans to continue supporting Lazio," explained director of communications Stefano De Martino.

"WE HAVE TO BRING BACK THAT FEAR IN OUR OPPONENTS, BY PRESSING THEM AND TRYING TO FIND TACTICAL SOLUTIONS."

- Italian international Florenzi says Rome must rediscover the fear factor.

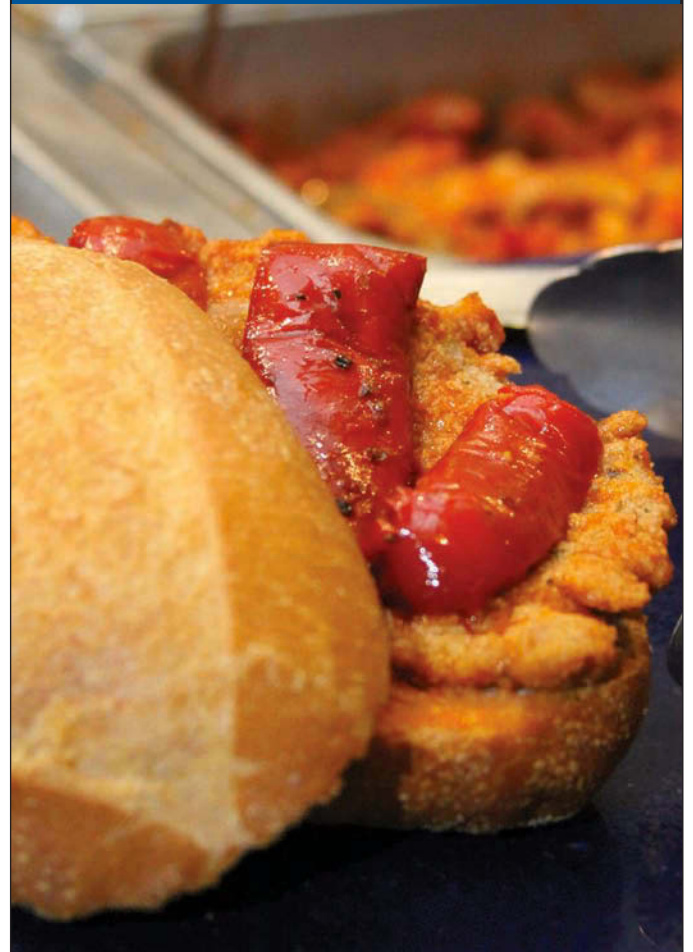
DID YOU KNOW?

A tally of 26 points after 21 rounds is the worst Inter start since notching up 22 points in 1946-47.

Javier Saviola broke his Serie A duck for Verona and became the first player ever to score in six Leagues with nine different clubs.

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**MOVING OUT**

A.C. Milan released rendered mock up plans of a new 48,000 seat home stadium that would see them move out of the San Siro, the home they share with bitter rivals Inter. If the stadium is built, AC Milan would move out after its current contract is up in 2018.

KEEPING THE FAITH

There has been an interesting little statistic developing this season in Serie A; this year has seen the fewest managers fired in the 20-team Italian league model: only four managerial changes being made at Chievo, Inter, Cagliari and Cesena.

ITALY ANNOUNCE PORTUGAL FRIENDLY

In good news for global fans of Serie A, Italy have announced a friendly with Portugal set for June 2015 in Qatar. Italy have not played Portugal in seven years, with the last game being a 3-1 victory for the Azzuri in a friendly in 2008, and they will look to repeat the same in June.

**TOTTI'S GREAT PLAN**

When Roma took on rivals Lazio, club legend Francesco Totti had a plan: one, plant an iPhone on the team's goalkeeper coach; two, make sure to score against Lazio; three, celebrate by grabbing the iPhone and snapping a selfie; four, become an internet sensation. Totti's selfie trended worldwide on Twitter and became an instant classic in Serie A's celebration history.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

7 Empoli equalled the all-time Serie A club record seven-round unbeaten run set in 2006-07.

9 Palermo set a new club record by going unbeaten for nine rounds, including five victories.

27 Torino hadn't conquered Inter at San Siro in Serie A since a 1-0 result in February 1988, scraping only six draws and nine defeats over the next 27 years.

**FOREIGN MONEY IN MILAN**

A.C. Milan may be undergoing a change in ownership, with reports of a €1 billion offer from Thailand and other offers for 30 per cent shares circulating in the media. However, current owner Silvio Berlusconi has outright declined interest in selling his stake in the team, for now.

**COMING TO AMERICA**

AS Roma announced a new partnership deal with seven clubs and academies in the United States in an effort to globalize its scouting network and produce talent from across the world. Roma's U.S. ambitions were seen last year too when the team visited for a tour of friendly games.

**BUY A SODA OR BUY A CLUB?**

Italian businessman Giampietro Manenti is the proud new owner of an Italian Serie A club, purchasing Parma F.C. for the staggering, astronomical figure of one euro (As in, €1). The best part? This is the second time in two months that Parma has been sold for that price!

**LOFTY AMBITIONS**

It's no secret that Juventus is the team to beat in the Italian Serie A this season, but long time captain and Juventus legend Gianluigi Buffon has set higher expectations than "just" winning – the Italian goalkeeper said his side must win the Scudetto with a 15-point gap in order to convincingly be champions.

**SINGING AZZURRI BLUES**

Italian manager Antonio Conte revealed an interesting pre-game ritual of his during his playing days, telling reporters, "I was very fond of karaoke in my playing days, especially before games. Now I leave the choice of music to my players. I prefer to prepare for a match in silence."

DROWNING IN DEBT?

FIGC President Carl Tavecchio had an interesting take on Italian football's financial problems, comparing them to the country's water drinking habits. "In our country the sales of mineral water have plunged by 30 per cent. People are drinking from the tap and it's the same with us in football. We no longer drink mineral water, but water from the tap."

DID YOU KNOW?

Juve are Mauro Icardi's favourite targets, as he has put five Serie A goals past them in just four encounters, scoring in every game.

Roma 1-1 Empoli on January 31, 2015 was the first Serie A match with two red cards in the first half since Udinese-Genoa in May 2012.

BY THE NUMBERS

11 Francesco Totti has scored 11 goals in Serie A editions of the Rome derby, a new record.

26 Daniele Conti set a new season record with the fastest sending off for two yellow cards after 26 minutes in Cagliari's 5-0 defeat to Palermo in Week 17.

DID YOU KNOW?

Manuel Pasqual became the first Italian on the scoresheet for Fiorentina this season in a 4-3 victory over Palermo in Week 18.

Max Allegri has never started the calendar year with a defeat, securing five wins and as many stalemates.



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ATLETICO'S PRODIGAL SON RETURNS

Fernando Torres has made an emotional return to the club where his career began. Mike Barnes considers the impact he might have at the Vicente Calderon

Fernando Torres has re-joined Atletico Madrid seven-and-a-half-years after leaving them to play for Liverpool. The returning local boy, who insists he has come back to win trophies, returns to the club he supported as a boy on a loan deal until the end of next season from Milan, where he remains under contract.

What Torres still means to Atleti soon became clear when a record 45,000 fans packed into the Vicente Calderon for his unveiling, bringing the player close to tears. "The club has grown. I have won trophies, but I also want to win trophies here," Torres promised that day. "I was missing something to motivate me, something I could only find here. Off the pitch I have been through many things," continued the forward who, having enjoyed success with Liverpool, endured a miserable time during four difficult years at Chelsea, who he joined for a record British transfer fee of around €70m, an amount that also made him the most expensive Spanish player in history.

"On a personal level I am more mature and very happy to be here," he added. "On the sporting level things have changed too. At 24 I realised something very hard, that I needed to leave so that the club and I could grow. It was the most difficult moment of my career." Chelsea put Torres out of his misery by loaning him to Milan on a two-year deal last August. The man they call El Nino made his debut for the Rossoneri in September, replacing Andrea Poli for the last 14 minutes of a 1-0 defeat against Juventus at San Siro. He scored his one and only Milan goal with a looping header in a 2-2 draw with Empoli two days later.

Torres struggled to make an impact in Serie A and quickly fell down the pecking order among the club's forwards strikers. Demetrio Albertini, a teammate of Torres' at Atletico in the 2002-03 season, defended the striker's slow start in Italy, saying that he just needed to rediscover self-confidence and self-belief. Spanish centre-forwards have tended to struggle in Serie A, but Fernando Llorente is showing that it is possible eventually to make the transition following his move from Athletic Bilbao to Juventus after a poor start. "Llorente is a great example and Torres has fitness problems too," Albertini explained as recently as December, when a move back to Madrid may well have already been under consideration. "After two or three months Llorente adapted to the Italian training and match tempo, but he was in a side that had won the Scudetto and only added him and Carlos Tevez. Torres could well be left on the bench, as he needs time to adapt."

As events played out, Torres was on the bench, but not given time to adapt. Reports of a return home to Madrid surfaced in the Spanish media at Christmas, as the Italian giants confirmed they had made Torres' loan move permanent, to initiate a possible deal with Atletico. His loan to Los Colchoneros in exchange for Alessio Cerchi was then announced shortly afterwards.

What makes Torres' return to the place where it all began for him so special is his extraordinary popularity with Atleti's fans,

who remember the hometown deadly marksman he was in 2007, rather than the misfiring disappointment of recent years he has become. He scored a lot of goals for the Spanish capital club - his 214 games in La Liga yielded 84 of them between 2001 and 2007 - but he was such a hit with the fans because his childhood was that club - as a youngster he supported his heroes in the stands as a fan, whilst on the pitch he quickly progressed through their junior ranks. He was filled with pride at wearing the red and white stripes at the club he adored and the Atleti fans returned that adoration in spades.

Liverpool's judgment in signing Torres in 2007 was vindicated straightaway as El Nino scored 24 goals in 24 games in his first season in the English top flight, but he was already a star, thanks mainly to a breakout 2002-03 campaign. Following 13 goals in his first full season in La Liga that year, it wasn't long before the 19-year-old Torres' talent emerged. He scored 19 League goals for Atleti in 35 games as well as making his full international debut against Portugal. However, whilst a key player, it was in an underachieving and inconsistent Atletico side - he needed a new challenge. He got that at Anfield, where a great deal of responsibility was immediately placed on his young shoulders. He was not alone, though, as he was

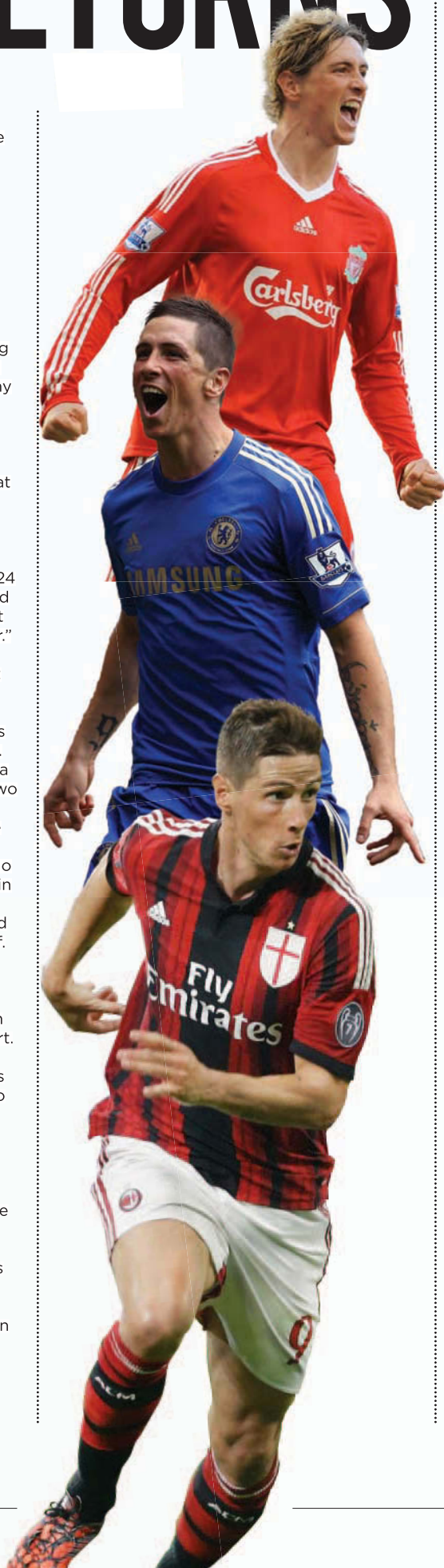


a member of a team where others were also relied on for success. Nevertheless, it was the No 9 that announced himself to the Anfield public by scoring a well-taken goal against Chelsea. With what became his trademark, he dropped his shoulder and eased past defenders before placing the ball immaculately into the far corner. Torres went on to net 81 times for the Merseyside giants in 142 games in all competitions. In contrast, Torres laboured at Stamford Bridge. A meagre return of just a single goal in 18 appearances in his first season in West London was the shape of things to come, although a comparatively productive 2012-13 season is often overlooked. Just eight goals in 36 EPL games was lamentably poor, but Torres had better luck in the cup competitions and especially in Europe, where his nine goals in just 16 appearances put a gloss on his overall record.

At the time, many were mystified by Torres' spectacular fall from grace at Chelsea under the management of Andre Villas-Boas compared to the way he had clearly flourished under Rafa Benitez's guidance at Liverpool. In retrospect, however, it is clear that Benitez was able to accommodate Torres' direct style and his reliance on power, acceleration and strength, whereas Villas-Boas was not, because Chelsea's more patient build-up approach was just not conducive to Torres' preference for breaking through defences.

Torres made his second debut for Atletico at the Vicente Calderon in their 2-0 win over Real Madrid in the Copa Del Rey. He didn't get on the scoresheet during his 58 minutes on the pitch, but it was the first time he had played in a victorious Atleti side against their fierce city rivals after eight previous attempts. In the second leg, he scored both his side's goals in a 2-2 draw to knock the holders out of the competition, 4-2 on

Left. Torres enjoyed mixed fortunes during his spells with Liverpool, Chelsea and Milan but relished his return to Atletico by scoring twice against Real Madrid



aggregate. His first strike, after 46 seconds, marked the first time he had ever been on target at the Santiago Bernabeu and his second, after just 37 seconds of the second half, set up a quarter-final with Barcelona. With Antoine Griezmann hitting form following his summer signing from Real Sociedad, Atletico Coach Diego Simeone has been able to allow Torres a gradual integration back into the side. The French international hit a hat-trick in a 4-1 win at Athletic Bilbao in December and almost had another in the 3-1 win over Rayo Vallecano in January. He was also the provider of the crosses that set up Torres for both goals at the Bernabeu and it is arguably he rather than Torres who is currently the golden boy at the Vicente Calderon.

Nevertheless, Simeone has said that he can still see the original youthful enthusiasm in Torres and expects him to flourish once he has settled into his second spell with Atletico. "Little by little he will gel with his teammates," the Coach told reporters. "With spaces in attack, he is a player who is very difficult to mark."

As well as his starring role at Atletico, Torres has scored 38 goals in winning 110 caps for Spain. He scored the only goal of the Euro 2008 Final against Germany in Vienna as Luis Aragones' side won the first of their famous treble, appeared as an extra-time substitute in the 1-0 World Cup Final win over the Netherlands in Johannesburg and scored one goal and provided the assist for another as Vicente del Bosque's Spain triumphed 4-0 over Italy in the Euro 2012 Final in Kiev. Del Bosque has predicted that Torres' return to Atletico Madrid will be good for the player himself as well as for the national side as it will be easier to keep track of his progress: "He has the opportunity to play and I think that's good. He and Atletico Madrid have come together again." That reunion has started off on the right foot, and it's now down to Torres to continue his rehabilitation where he first made his name. Back home.

Factfile

Name:

Fernando Torres

Born:

March 20, 1984 (Fuenlabrada, Spain)

Ht / Wt:

1.85m / 78kg

Position:

Striker

Club:

Atletico Madrid

Club stats			
Season	Club	Apps	Goals
2000-01	Atletico Madrid	4	1
2001-02	Atletico Madrid	36	6
2002-03	Atletico Madrid	29	13
2003-04	Atletico Madrid	35	19
2004-05	Atletico Madrid	38	16
2005-06	Atletico Madrid	36	13
2006-07	Atletico Madrid	36	14
2007-08	Liverpool	33	24
2008-09	Liverpool	24	14
2009-10	Liverpool	22	18
2010-11	Liverpool	23	9
2010-11	Chelsea	14	1
2011-12	Chelsea	32	6
2012-13	Chelsea	36	8
2013-14	Chelsea	28	5
2014-15	Milan	10	1
2014-15	Atletico Madrid	3	0

International stats		
Year	Apps	Goals
2003	3	0
2004	11	1
2005	12	8
2006	13	5
2007	6	1
2008	13	3
2009	13	3
2010	11	3
2011	9	1
2012	10	4
2013	5	5
2014	4	2

FERNANDO'S PROGRESS

In his first La Liga season, 2002-03, Torres scored 13 goals in 29 appearances for Atletico Madrid. In the following campaign he was on target 19 times in 35 games, finishing joint third highest scorer in La Liga. Torres was made club captain aged 19 as Atletico finished seventh in La Liga and qualified for the 2004 Intertoto Cup. Atletico reached the Final, but lost 3-1 on penalties to Villarreal after a 2-2 aggregate draw.

In July 2007, Torres stated that he had turned down an offer to join Chelsea. He eventually moved to Liverpool on a six-year contract, holding a Press conference in Madrid to bid farewell to the Atletico fans. The fee, said to be around €26m, was the highest in Liverpool's history.

Torres hit his first hat-trick for Liverpool in a 4-2 League Cup victory over Reading, all three goals coming in the second half. His first EPL hat-trick against Middlesbrough was followed by another against West Ham, making him the first Liverpool player since 1946 to score hat-tricks in successive home games. Scoring his 24th EPL goal in the final game of the 2008-09 season against Tottenham, Torres became the most prolific overseas goal scorer in a debut season in England, overhauling Ruud van Nistelrooy's record. He ended the season in joint second place with Emmanuel Adebayor in the race for the EPL golden boot award.

Torres came third behind Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi in the vote for the 2008 Ballon d'Or award.



SPANISH STAR

Torres made his debut for the Spanish national team in 2003 in a friendly against Portugal. He scored his first goal for Spain against Italy the following year. Torres scored seven goals in 11 games in qualifying for the 2006 World Cup, making him Spain's top scorer in qualification, including a vital two goals against Belgium and his first international hat-trick against San Marino.

Torres provided the assist for David Villa to score Spain's first goal at Euro 2008 in the first group stage game against Russia. He scored his first goal of the tournament as Spain beat Sweden 2-1 and bagged the winner in the 1-0 victory in the final against Germany, when he was also named man of the match. The forward hit the fastest ever hat-trick by a Spanish international when he completed his treble after just 17 minutes of a Confederations Cup game against New Zealand in 2009. Torres netted twice as Spain defeated Ireland 4-0 at Euro 2012. He came on as a substitute in the Final against Italy, scoring one goal and making another as Spain won a second consecutive European Championship with a 4-0 victory. He was awarded the Golden Boot for the tournament with three goals and one assist.

Torres won his 100th cap for Spain against Saudi Arabia in 2012, making him the sixth highest capped player for his country. He captained the Spanish side in the same game in the absence of Iker Casillas.

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ONE ON ONE NEYMAR JR

Try to keep up with Neymar and you'll find you made a wrong turn at Albuquerque several steps ago. The magic in Neymar's toes sparkles in Blaugrana blue and red, forged in the greens and yellows of sunny Brazil. Here stands a titan with his tongue out and a finger to his lips in symbolic silence, taunting and goading opposition and obliterating them with cheekiness and flair. Diego Jokas spoke with Barcelona's Brazilian star, here's what Neymar had to say:

La Liga is very close this season – how do you see it going?

You are right it is very close between us and Real Madrid – and of course Atletico Madrid as well. There is a long way to go, but I think it will be very close until the end of the season. All we can do is carry on working hard and playing well – and hope that is enough for us to win the league.

Is it very much taking things a game at a time?

It has to be – there is still so many competitions to win that we can't think far ahead. To stay focused we can always only be thinking about the next game.

How important will the league game against Real Madrid be in March?

It is just one game – but of course it will be very important. It means so much to the players and the fans – but with things so close between us it could be a very important game in the battle for the championship.

And The Champions League?

Again that is a competition that I am desperate to win – and also a competition Barcelona have had a lot of success in. Manchester City have very strong players – but we are confident that we can progress.

After a big transfer in the summer there have been some Suarez critics this season. How is he reacting to that?

All I can say is that he works very hard. I think because he has not been scoring lots of goals that is why people are talking. What they are not talking about though is all the chances he creates for the team or how hard he works for the team. He is a very important player for us.

Do you think goals will come for him?

With the quality he has – I am sure they will.

How much of an honour is it to play with Messi?

I think I have said everything that needs to be said about Messi. He is the best in the world, he is a star, and nobody is close to him.

What do you like to do to have fun?

I like just to be at home with friends, eating, playing video games, watching movies – that sort of thing. At home I am not the centre of attention, I am not Neymar the football player, I am just a regular member of the family – and that is just the way I like it.

How confident are you feeling about this summer's Copa America?

It will be difficult to win because there are so many good teams. Colombia are in our group – and they showed how strong they are at The World Cup. We feel we must do well after the disappointment of The World Cup – and of course our intention is to win the competition.

Could you ever see yourself playing in The MLS?

I love Barcelona, I plan to be here for many years, but I can't predict the future.





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NEYMAR STATS

CAREER
40
CLUB GOALS

1 CONFEDERATIONS CUP (2013)
1 OLYMPIC SILVER MEDAL (2012)
1 SUPERCOPA DE ESPANA (2012)

CAREER
304
CLUB GAMES

CAREER
9
INTL. GOALS

3 Superc  l  o de las Am  ricas (11/12/14)
1 Copa do Brasil: (2010)
1 SUPERCOPA DE ESPANA (2012)

CAREER
57
INTL. GAMES

DID YOU KNOW

Neymar had top billing at the World Cup last summer, and the Brazil and Barcelona ace is well on his way to eventually replacing older teammate Lionel Messi as the world's best player - but did you know he once channeled Michael Jackson in a post-game press conference?

- 10.** Neymar won the Bronze Boot as the third highest scorer at the World Cup last year, adding to the Golden Ball he won as best player at the 2013 Confederations Cup.
- 9.** He was marked for greatness at an early age. In 2010, Neymar won a stand-off with his manager after being replaced as penalty taker at Santos - the coach was promptly sacked. A couple of months later, the 18-year old finished third at the South American Player of the Year awards.
- 8.** That same year, Neymar made his international debut in New Jersey, scoring a goal against the United States. The August 2010 friendly was just weeks after Brazil had gone to the 2010 World Cup - without Neymar.
- 7.** Neymar may be compared to another famous Brazilian number 10, Pel  , and another former Barcelona striker in Ronaldo, but the country's current star compares himself more to his idols Rom  rio and Garrincha.
- 6.** Neymar beat all of those Brazilian legends to one thing - in 2014, he became the first Brazilian athlete to grace the cover of Time magazine.
- 5.** As with Pel   a generation earlier, the Brazilian government sought to keep Neymar in Brazil for as long as possible. He trialled at Real Madrid as a 14-year-old, but eventually opted to stay at Santos - luckily for Barcelona fans.
- 4.** In the post-match press conference after scoring a hat-trick against Celtic in December 2013, Neymar celebrated his team's 6-1 win by donning an MJ-style diamond-studded fedora and coattails.
- 3.** Neymar will go head-to-head with Lionel Messi and Alexis S  nchez this summer, with each player going for their first Copa Am  rica. The tournament will be played in Chile in June.
- 2.** Ahead of the 2014 World Cup, Neymar was named the world's most marketable athlete by SportsPro magazine. Sports-wear giant Nike had the Brazilian's image everywhere in the run-up to the World Cup.
- 1.** In August 2010, Neymar hit five goals in a Copa do Brasil last-16 game against Guarani. His Santos side ran out 8-1 winners.





ONE ON ONE

XAVI

XAVI STATS

CAREER
87
CLUB GOALS

CAREER
807
CLUB GAMES

CAREER
12
INT'L GOALS

CAREER
133
INT'L GAMES

2 COPA DEL REY (2012)
1 FIFA WORLD CUP (2010)
2 EURO CUP (2008, 2012)
2 EURO CUP (2008, 2012)
6 SUPERCOPA DE ESPANA (05'-13')
3 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE (06/09/11')
7 LA LIGA CHAMPIONS (98'-13')

Silky smooth in his passing, like wind between pillars in his movement, Xavi Hernandez is FC Barcelona. The maestro of Lionel Messi's orchestra, Xavi is what makes Barcelona tick, or, rather, tiki-taka; his is the foot that drives the frustrating beehive pass that makes Barcelona oh so very efficient. His vision? Second only to eagles soaring above Camp Nou. Diego Jocas had a chance to speak with Xavi Hernandez, Barcelonas midfield master:

Will this season be one of the closest title races with Real Madrid?

There is a good chance. The good thing for us is they have to still visit the Camp Nou – so maybe that gives us a little advantage. There are a lot of positive vibes in the dressing room right now – and everybody believes that we can win the league.

You have played in many games against Real Madrid – do you still get the same feeling?

Every game I play against them is like the first one. You have no idea how much it means to the fans and the city of Barcelona

You have won many trophies with Barcelona, but after going trophyless last season – how important is it you win a trophy this season?

If we do not win a trophy this season it will be a disaster. It might put pressure on us by saying that, but it is the truth. This club demands success – and if we don't win a trophy this season it will really be a disaster.

Neymar has taken things to another level this season – how do you rate him?

His performances have been brutal – you just feel that every time he gets the ball he is going to do something special. At the moment Messi is the best in the world and has been for a lot of years – but one day Neymar will be the best in the world – I am sure of that.

You have played with some great players in your time at Barcelona, but how do you rate the front three of Messi, Neymar, and Suarez?

One word – unstoppable. They are the best attacking trio in the world. They are all amazing players individually – but also they complement each other very well. I am glad that I only have to defend against them in training games.

Barcelona have this transfer ban – how has that affected the club?

We believe it has been an injustice – I have been outspoken about that – but now it is time to only concentrate on having a successful season.

You said 2014 was a very difficult year?

It was with the disappointment of not winning a trophy at Barcelona – then of course the big disappointment of The World Cup in Brazil. Like I said now the mood is very positive now – and there is a lot of belief within the squad.

How close did you come to joining The MLS this summer?

I was not joking when I said my wife and I had our suitcases packed for New York. I was all ready to join New York City FC – but then I personally got a call from The Barcelona President. He assured me that I had a big role to play and that I would feature in many games – after a phone call like that it became impossible for me to leave Barcelona

So you have ruled out a move to The MLS?

I agreed to stay at Barcelona for another year, and that was the right decision. In the summer I will look at my options again with my family – and we can make a decision from there.



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KROOS FACTOR

PLAYING A MAJOR ROLE IN REAL MADRID'S SUCCESSES THIS SEASON HAS BEEN THEIR PROFESSOR, TONI KROOS. JEREMY LIM HAILS THE YOUNG GERMAN'S METEORIC RISE.



THE NUMBERS.

CAREER

40

CLUB GOALS

CAREER

304

CLUB GAMES

CAREER

9

INTL GOALS

CAREER

57

INTL GAMES

Even for the usually phlegmatic Toni Kroos, stifling a rare show of emotion was impossible. A good summer had just gotten better. It's not every day that you sign for Real Madrid and are presented in front of 10,000 fans cheering your name. His face resembling that of a starstruck schoolboy more than an international superstar who had just won the World Cup, the midfielder became an instant hit. "Real Madrid are the biggest club in the world," he said, and in 2014 they were.

Kroos couldn't promise to win the club's 10th European Cup title - the fabled Decima - like Gareth Bale had because it had already been won. So he promised to try to win the next one and the crowd roared its approval. It was to be a new beginning for the club but the Blancos faithful were desperately seeking the same winning conclusion. Kroos was 24, supremely talented and hungry for silverware. He already seemed the perfect signing, one driven by the future.

It later emerged to the dismay of the same supporters that that very future had no place for Angel di Maria and Xabi Alonso. A commanding 79 per cent of people polled by sports paper AS voted that the squad emerged worse off after the duo departed last August. A false start to the season had brought, amongst others, a second straight home loss to neighbours Atletico Madrid. Just 100 days had passed since Iker Casillas lifted the outfit's 10th European Cup trophy in Lisbon, the euphoria forgotten. Meanwhile, fans tried to forget Di Maria and Alonso, but couldn't.

Any celebration over their demise had proved premature, however. Carlo Ancelotti has fixed, Cristiano Ronaldo is scoring, and now Kroos controls the action beautifully. "I've been surprised by the fact he always plays the same way, whatever the pressure. He's very important. A lot of our play goes through him," praised the Coach.

It matters little now that Kroos had been signed first and foremost to be Alonso's teammate rather than his heir. The Greifswald native sets the tone in a side overflowing with talent but also egos from the base of midfield. There, he combines function and flair to allow Luka Modric, Isco and fellow summer arrival James Rodriguez force the issue higher up. "Kroos plays at pace, always picks the right pass, doesn't lose the ball and wins back possession," says Ancelotti. The complete midfielder.

"He does everything so easily, with fluidity. He is one of the players I enjoy watching," Alonso, the one who Ancelotti calls 'Professor', said, crowning his successor. "For me, he is one of the five best midfielders in the world." More personal recognition followed in the form of a place in the FIFA World XI, as well as IFFHS' nomination as best playmaker of 2014. If the landslide took anyone by surprise, it was only because critics had previously regarded the former prospect with disappointment for not always having the right commitment or temperament to match his ability. Keeping Kroos' head in the game may once have been tricky but the precocious youngster has grown since. So have his responsibilities within a team determined not just to win, but to win over, playing the kind of spectacular football the Bernabeu craves. "Ancelotti told me that he needed me and he has given me a central role," the player revealed. "He wanted a little bit more balance and told me to further improve our play by having more possession of the ball." Jupp Heynckes, the man who formerly gave Kroos his breakthrough at Bayern Munich,

describes his impact in the Spanish capital as 'destiny'. If it had been up to Pep Guardiola, the World Cup winner would never have departed. It was the Catalan who honed the positional side of his protegee's play first. To stay ahead meant to stay behind, to seek out the space he might otherwise have been starved off higher up the pitch.

The star pupil was to continue learning under the ex-Barcelona schoolmaster but now his training has been completed anyway, not in Munich, but in Madrid. "I'm playing 10 yards further back here than at Bayern, in a clear 'No 6' position," the Blancos No 8 states. "Guardiola told me at the beginning: 'Toni, the good players move around during their career and each time further back'. With Ancelotti I could follow that same path." "He's another 'professor'. He has aced his crash course in replacing Alonso," attests his Coach.

The proof of graduation lies in the sheer continuity in the team Kroos has enjoyed in the side, starting every League game during the first half of the season. "It was clear that he will not only come out a top player at Real, but moreover will be important for the team," Alonso said in November. And with their new totem at the wheel, Madrid won 22 games on the trot to finish the year cruising top of La Liga and the world, winning the Club World Cup Final after beating San Lorenzo. It hasn't seemed so much about the chase of titles as it is the chase of records. Which is of course what Real Madrid are about. Now, they await their fate in the Champions League. Florentino Perez had stood beside Kroos during the latter's presentation. "You should know that the fans are already dreaming of an 11th European Cup," the President announced into the microphones. As club and player approach the peak of their powers, those dreams are increasingly being brought into focus.



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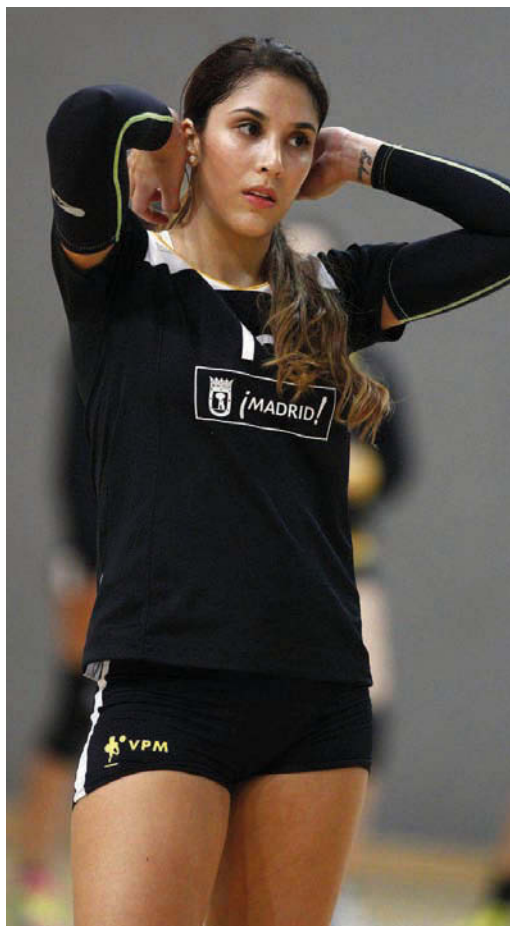
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JAMES KEEPS IT IN THE FAMILY

Real Madrid midfielder James Rodriguez is not the only one in the family household with sporting prowess. His wife Daniela Ospina, 22, plays volleyball for Los Blancos in the Spanish capital and is a former beach volleyball international with Colombia.



DIVIDING LA LIGA

La Liga has been repeatedly criticized for allocating the majority of its TV rights to Real Madrid and Barcelona, with last season no different as they both accounted for almost 40 percent of the €755m shared to all 20 clubs.

According to AS, the LFP intend to divide up €800m of TV rights into €80m for Segunda Liga clubs and €710m for top-tier sides. Out of this €710m, 50% would be determined by sporting results and social contributions, while no club would be entitled to more than one-fifth of the remaining 40%. President Javier Tebas recently announced his intention to reduce the disparity between Clasico clubs and the rest of La Liga, which saw Madrid earn €140m in 2013-14, compared to Almeria's cut of €18. Such is the disproportionate nature of Spain's TV rights distribution that champions Atletico Madrid earned €32.5m less than relegated Premier League outfit Cardiff City.

ATLETI STAR ARRESTED

Atletico Madrid's Cristian Ansaldi missed his team's Cup tie with Barcelona after getting arrested on the way to the ground. Stopped at a police road block, the Argentine was unable to produce his documents, fired off insults at the policemen and slammed his door on an officer's hand. He was promptly taken away before being released after midnight.



RONALDO IN DISGUISE

Cristiano Ronaldo was spotted wandering the streets of Madrid dressed in tattered clothes, wearing fake facial hair and looking generally homeless. He kicked a soccer ball around with a child in a city square before unmasking himself, to the child's delight, and signed the ball as a gift, too!

DID YOU KNOW?

Antoine Griezmann's brace for Atletico Madrid against Rayo Vallecano this season made him only the third Frenchman to score 50 plus goals in La Liga – behind Larbi Benbarek and Karim Benzema.

Nabil Ghilas became the first Algerian to score against Real Madrid in La Liga when he netted in Cordoba's 2-1 home defeat to Los Blancos this season.

BY THE NUMBERS

9.8 Less than 10 seconds were on the clock when Cordoba's Romanian striker Florin Andone scored against Eibar in January, the fourth-fastest goal in La Liga history.



CHERYSHEV'S SHIN PADS

On-loan Denis Cheryshev scored Villarreal's first goal in their 3-2 defeat to Barcelona at the Camp Nou, after which the Real Madrid winger admitted he had been playing with shin pads bearing Los Blancos' badge.



TURAN BLAMES FIFA

An embarrassed Arda Turan insisted FIFA got it wrong with his vote for Best Coach of 2014 at the Ballon d'Or ceremony. The Turk claimed he chose Diego Simeone, his boss at Atletico Madrid, while FIFA's official website maintained he picked Jose Mourinho.



'EL NINO' TO 'EL HOMBRE'

Fernando Torres's stunning two-goal performance to help knock Real Madrid out of the Copa del Rey had his boss Diego Simeone purring over his return to the club: "He left, matured, and is now a man," said the Argentine.

BY THE NUMBERS

727 Celta Vigo went 727 minutes without scoring a goal in La Liga this season before Fabian Orellana's 61st minute equaliser against Valencia on January 10.

"IT'S NOT EASY TO GET A GOOD CUP OF TEA OVER HERE. MY ASSISTANT, BILLY MCKINLAY, HAS BROUGHT A KETTLE OVER SO WE CAN HAVE A CUP OF TEA AFTER TRAINING. I'M NOT SURE ALL MY PLAYERS KNOW WHAT IT IS, AS MOST SPANISH HOUSEHOLDS DON'T HAVE KETTLES"

– David Moyes, recently-appointed Real Sociedad manager, describes the hardest part of adopting to life in Spain

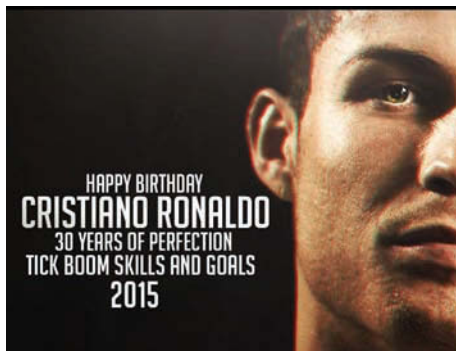


MOYES DEMOLISHES FAN'S CRISPS

David Moyes took it literally when the referee sent him to the stands in Real Sociedad's Copa del Rey game with Villarreal, nimbly leaping over the barriers and sitting with fans. Then, on being offered a crisp by a youngster, the Scot didn't hesitate to tuck in.

BY THE NUMBERS

2765 Fernando Torres' substitute appearance for Atletico Madrid against Barcelona in January came 2,765 days after his last League outing for the club, a 2-1 win over Osasuna in June 2007.



RONALDO UNDER FIRE

Cristiano Ronaldo, the Real Madrid icon, found himself in a bit of hot water after pictures and video came out of him singing and having a good time during a party celebrating his 30th birthday. Not so bad, except for the fact that, mere hours before, Real Madrid were mauled 4-0 by rivals Atletico Madrid!



THE ORANGE STREAK

There are plenty of speedsters in Spain but some stat gurus have now unearthed La Liga's fastest player; and, while he's no Barry Allen donning the red costume of The Flash, Valencia winger Sofiane Feghouli takes that title, reaching a top speed of 35.53 km/h. He beats out Michel (Almeria, 35.42 km/h) and Boka (Malaga, 35.2 km/h).

DID YOU KNOW?

In the last 20 years only one team has won both legs of a Copa del Rey tie against Real Madrid - Real Mallorca in 2007-08 (2-1 and 0-1).



ABIDAL'S SURPRISE MADRID ALLY

Eric Abidal revealed he received support from an unlikely source during his battle against liver cancer: "Cristiano Ronaldo encouraged me through Karim Benzema and we spoke. You can't criticise him. What he does on the pitch is another thing," said the Frenchman.



HOW POLITE, MANDZUKIC!

Atletico Madrid didn't just walk out of their city derby with all three points but with some bragging rights as well. Croatian striker Mario Mandzukic got his digs in after the match, telling reporters, "It was really a pleasure to outplay Real Madrid like that." Cheeky!

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DID YOU KNOW?

For the first time in their 112-year history Real Madrid conceded a goal in the first minute of each half, Fernando Torres striking twice to book Atletico Madrid a place in the quarter-finals of this season's Copa del Rey.

When Lionel Messi upended defender Jesus Gamez in the box during Barcelona's 3-1 win over Atletico Madrid on January 11, it was the first time the Argentine had conceded a penalty in his entire professional career.

Real Sociedad have beaten Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid and Barcelona at Anoeta this season under three different Coaches- Jagoba Arrasate, Asier Santana and David Moyes.

HOLA, PAPA PIQUE

Barcelona central defender Gerard Pique is a father to a second child after his wife, Latin musician Shakira, gave birth to another baby boy. Pique and Shakira had their first child, Milan, two years ago and welcomed their second, Sasha, late in January.



BY THE NUMBERS

91 Atletico Madrid striker Fernando Torres scored 91 times in 244 appearances in his first spell with Los Rojiblancos before leaving for Liverpool.



DOCTOR OF RONALDO SCIENCES

The University of British Columbia Okanagan in Canada has taken to Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo, it seems, offering its students a special elective course on the Portuguese winger. The course is in the school's sociology department and focuses on his economic commodification.



NEYMAR, THE SILENCER

It's no secret that Barcelona forward Neymar loves getting tattooed and the Brazilian added yet another bit of ink, getting the word "Shhh..." written onto the side of his right index finger. It goes well with one of his signature goal celebrations, the crowd silencing finger to mouth being a staple of this fiery star.



MESSI, THE ALIEN

Something strange is happening at Atletico Madrid's scouting department. Perhaps they believe Lionel Messi to be an extra-terrestrial being? Atletico head coach Luis Enrique describing his numbers as "from another galaxy," and Arda Turan, an Atletico Madrid player calling him an "alien," all in the same week - weird!

DID YOU KNOW?

Atletico Madrid's 2-2 Copa del Rey draw with Real Madrid in January made it five derbies without defeat against their neighbours, the first time since between 1978 and 1990.

BARCA HONOUR TITO

Barcelona have renamed their training ground in honour of former Coach Tito Vilanova, who died last April. The Catalan club announced that Field 1 of their Ciutat Esportiva training complex would be retitled Camp Tito Vilanova in remembrance of the trainer following defeat in his long-running battle with throat cancer at just 45.



BARCELONA IN TROUBLE

FC Barcelona is facing legal trouble after allegedly dodging around \$10.2 million in taxes as part of the \$107 million transfer deal that saw Brazilian icon Neymar join the club a few years ago. This saga has drawn the ire of players like Xavi, who said he and his teammates were tired of hearing about it.

"I STILL LOVE THIS SPORT THE WAY I DID WHEN I WAS 15. WHEN I WAKE UP ONE DAY AND THAT'S NO LONGER THE CASE, I'LL RETIRE."

- At 35, the Juventus midfielder is well Juves average age of 29, but nonetheless a starter for Italy's most successful club.



ZIDANE BEING GROOMED

In the last few years, French legend Zinedine Zidane has undergone a transformation of image, going from fabled footballer to touchline tactician at Real Madrid. The man who cites Pep Guardiola as his inspiration is touted to be next in line at the Madrid throne, groomed as the club's next head coach.

BY THE NUMBERS

100

Malaga debutant Javi Guerra scored the 100th goal at the New San Mames against Athletic Bilbao on January 25, the first having been scored by Celta Vigo striker Charles in September 2013.



ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER RECORD

Lionel Messi is a record breaker, plain and simple, and on the day of his 300th La Liga appearance, the legendary Argentine did not disappoint. Messi picked out Neymar with a perfect assist, which secured yet another record: he is now La Liga's top assist provider with 125 recorded assists to his name.

DID YOU KNOW?

Cristiano Ronaldo's 2014 FIFA Ballon d'Or success was the sixth successive year a La Liga player had won the award, equalling the Bundesliga's record set between 1976 and 1981.

Sevilla striker Carlos Bacca became the first ever visiting player to score and miss a penalty in the first half of a La Liga match at Mestalla in his team's 3-1 defeat to Valencia in January.

The 2014-15 campaign saw Eibar become La Primera's newest member. The Basques' tiny 5,250-capacity Ipurua ground is 19 times smaller than that of Barcelona's Camp Nou.

KEEP CALM AND SCORE A HAT-TRICK

THE RIVALRY OF THREES

The La Liga assist record wasn't the only thing Messi matched on his 300th league appearance; Messi also tied Cristiano Ronaldo's hat-trick record as well, putting three past Levante in what ended up being his 23rd three-goal performance.

BY THE NUMBERS

10

The number of times Atletico Madrid have knocked Real Madrid out of the Copa del Rey - 1959-60, 1960-61, 1963-64, 1964-65, 1968-69, 1986-87, 1990-91, 1991-92, 2012-13 and 2014-15.



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GENERAL ALONSO

XABI ALONSO ONCE HELPED INFLICT A DRUBBING ON PEP GUARDIOLA BUT THE DUO ARE DEADLY TOGETHER NOW. JEREMY LIM LOOKS AT THE VETERAN MIDFIELDER'S SHORT BUT SIGNIFICANT SPELL AT BAYERN MUNICH.



THE NUMBERS.

CAREER
37
CLUB GOALS

CAREER
607
CLUB GAMES

CAREER
16
INTL. GOALS

CAREER
112
INTL. GAMES

Taking the ball in his step, Xabi Alonso looked up and pinged a precise diagonal ball to the flank. Over the next hour, the midfielder directed traffic in the centre of the park, set up a scoring opportunity and constantly rearranged his midfield line. Not a lot appeared to have changed, and yet, almost everything had.

The speed with which Alonso assimilated Bayern Munich's system by the time of his debut at Schalke last August had startled. A single training session was all it took - "Just a light one," he recalls. The midfielder's move to Bavaria was announced only two days prior to his Bundesliga bow. He had been left on Real Madrid's bench five days before, after telling his old outfit that he wished to leave. Like that, five years spent on the Blancos' books came to a close, his career as a Spain international ending in ignominy that summer too. But just as a door closed back home, a window had opened in the offer from Munich. "I want to play at my highest possible level," the deep-lying playmaker considered. "At this stage I thought I needed a fresh start somewhere else."

As it turns out, none of the residual staleness that plagued his World Cup migrated with him to Germany. Bayern's new engine room commander has passed, launched, chipped, shot, tackled, intercepted and headed his way into the club's starting XI, and Bundesliga history. "He's an intelligent player. He pushes the team forward, metre by metre," rhapsodised honorary club President Franz Beckenbauer. "I've been saying it for weeks - he's our most important transfer." Sports paper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* concluded Bayern are now playing 'Xabi-Alonso-Fussball' and it wasn't merely hyperbole. His attempted pass count at 1,554 topped everyone in the Bundesliga by the end of the Hinrunde, 90 per cent of those finding a teammate. Such influence on the side early on gave testament to the footballing genius within - his adaptation, shrunk from a matter of not weeks or months, but days. Next to no time had elapsed before the 33-year-old registered 204 touches against Koln, a League record. "200-plus touches?" Thomas Muller regarded the midfield totem's feat with something amounting to disbelief. "I'd need a whole season to do that." But their Coach, Pep Guardiola, couldn't have waited that long for performances of such magnitude. Signing a veteran on inflated wages may have seemed a luxury under normal circumstances. Yet time was in short supply and so were the midfielders at his disposal.

The indefinite injury absences of Bastian Schweinsteiger, Thiago Alcantara and Javi Martinez in the summer had threatened to send even mighty Bayern tumbling from her objectives - the ultimate being the Champions League. After being humiliated by Real Madrid in the semi final the previous term - "The biggest cock-up of my managerial career" - Guardiola could ill afford another false step on the continent. Alonso, the platform for Madrid's famous 4-0 masterclass at Allianz Arena, has swapped sides to put his stamp on his boss' passing and possession blueprint. "I'm pretty sure Bayern have learned something from that game," he stated simply, without irony. "You always try to improve and learn from mistakes."

Clinching the domestic double, which included lifting the fastest Bundesliga crown in history, still constituted an excellent basis for Guardiola's work. The Catalan has been introduced precisely to oversee the sort of European dynasty he had raised with ex-club

Barcelona, however. "I've got the feeling that the team is hungry," Alonso confirmed in November. "The Champions League is the big one, the glamorous one, the one we want." None doubted what was spoken.

Demolishing Group E rivals Roma 7-1 just weeks before had counted much more as the kind of statement Bayern were waiting to deliver. Opponents, and likewise those who previously expressed distrust of Guardiola's philosophies, have steadily been silenced by virtuoso displays from the centre of the park. Alonso compares Bayern's style of play to 'jazz'. With the Basque in their midst, there is balance and rhythm. There are results too. The League is Die Roten's to lose, after already opening up an 11-point lead over second-placed Wolfsburg before the Bundesliga resumed in January.

The two-time Champions League winner's eyes are firmly locked on the prize that everyone wants - expects - nevertheless, ready to be the driving force once more. "I had the confidence that I could deliver good football," Alonso assures. His former side Real Madrid had started to feel like a 'noisy house' after a summer of upheaval, and he made sure to walk out the door before he could be pushed. Now, he's showing exactly why he's central to Pep's plans to dominate Europe again.

"Guardiola made it clear what he wanted of me. It's been a surprise that I have managed to do it since day one but I felt confident and comfortable with my teammates from the start," he said. Bayern, in turn, have embraced the Spaniard's contributions. At its most inspired and efficient, the side is irresistible, with Alonso as its heartbeat. Some things might change. Others never will.



MIDFIELD GENERAL: **ILKAY GÜNDOĞAN**

REOCCURRING BACK INJURIES HAVE STOPPED IIKAY GUNDOGAN FROM LIFTING BORUSSIA DORTMUND TO WHERE THEY ONCE WERE. JEREMY LIM WRITES.

GUNDOGAN BACK

You don't quite realise how important your talisman is till he's gone. For İlkay Gündoğan, a player who missed 434 days of action for Borussia Dortmund due to a recurring back injury, there had been no pleasure letting his club find out the hard way, however. The former German champs began 2015 sitting 17th in the Bundesliga, only kept off the bottom by superior goal difference. Their downward spiral had hurt Gündoğan, because Dortmund are a club he genuinely cares about. Almost four years have passed since the Gelsenkirchen native swapped his Schalke upbringing for their hated rivals, the fans forming Signal Iduna Park's iconic Yellow Wall likewise adopting him as one of their own. Dortmund are no strangers to a debacle, yet the overall malaise that plagued the team was as bad as memory allowed. A decade ago, the historic Ruhr outfit stood peering into the abyss as bankruptcy loomed. Just as before, Dortmund's path to salvation at the start of 2015 hadn't been laid out for them clearly. For one ludicrous moment, it seemed that, just as Bayern Munich had become too big for the Bundesliga, the historic Ruhr outfit were too small for the top-flight. Though Jürgen Klopp had constantly warned that his young, title-winning team would eventually run its course, their collapse in the final months of 2014 indeed bordered on the ridiculous. The narrative was that Dortmund's charismatic trainer was going through the seven-year itch with a club that had been married too long to his ideals. But still his devout troops religiously carried out their leader's instructions to continuously run and press. Gegenpressing has taken on a renewed form of ferocity as the side hurled itself forward to recover the ball to put it in the back of the net and arrest their slide in the table. Except when they charged around in the press without Gündoğan - a player of perfect vision, timing and sense of the game going on around him - they ended up merely running in circles, going up blind alleys instead of finding the quickest way to their opponent's goal. The trend of then conceding on the break as exhausted legs struggled to make their way back in defence grew into a vicious cycle they couldn't escape from. And so Gündoğan's return arrives as providence for his side as they await their destinies in May. Immaculate in possession and able to speed up or slow down play at will, the 24-year-old promises to return some of Dortmund's old intent in the pass as he puts them back in charge of games, and therefore their season, again. A long Winterpause spent on a training retreat in the mild climate of Spain's La Manga region left fans satisfied that batteries had been recharged sufficiently to bring Dortmund's campaign back in from the cold. Gündoğan eagerly anticipated the second half of the term. It was time to help the side he held dear back from the brink.

THE NUMBERS.

CAREER
20
CLUB GOALS

CAREER
151
CLUB GAMES



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COACHING LEGEND PASSES AWAY

Bundesliga's most successful Coach Udo Lattek died aged 80 following a battle with Parkinson's disease. He led Bayern Munich to European Cup glory in 1974 and later claimed the UEFA Cup with Borussia Monchengladbach in 1979, while securing eight German League titles along the way.

BY THE NUMBERS

472 Overall League goals scored after 171 games played - 19 per team.

DID YOU KNOW?

Only Bayern and Borussia Dortmund have managed to be both mid-season leaders and end-of-season kings within the last 17 years. Kaiserslautern did it previously in 1997-98.

Udo Lattek is the only manager to lift all three major European trophies with different clubs - the European Cup with Bayern, the UEFA Cup with Borussia Monchengladbach and the Cup Winners' Cup with Barcelona.

BY THE NUMBERS

8 Werder Bremen striker Franco Di Santo notched eight times by Week 18, which had already doubled his tally from last term.

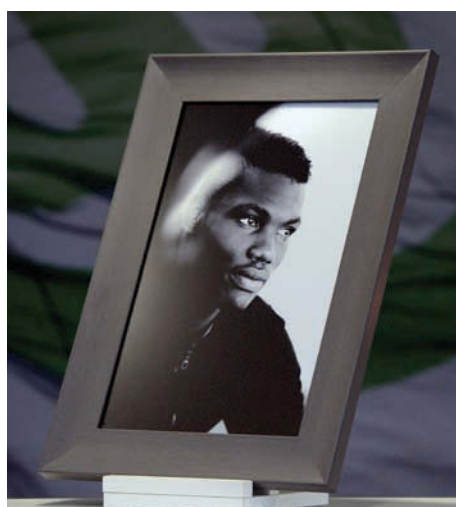


TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Pep Guardiola became a little too excited when celebrating Arjen Robben's opening goal in Bayern's 1-1 draw with Schalke. The Catalan turned to bear-hug the person nearest to him, but unfortunately this show of affection didn't go down well with the stony-faced fourth official on the receiving end of his unbridled joy, who spurned his advances before ushering him back to the technical area.

BY THE NUMBERS

4 Goals conceded by Bayern Munich in their opening game of the new year away to Wolfsburg, with the same opponents hitting five past them in April 2009 when inflicting their last similarly heavy Bundesliga defeat.



FOOTBALL MOURNS MALANDA

20-year-old Wolfsburg midfielder Junior Malanda tragically lost his life during the winter break in a car crash near the city of Bielefeld, which shocked his club to its core. The Belgian Under-21 international had made 15 appearances this season before his untimely death.



SCHURRLE BACK TO BUNDESLIGA

World Cup winner Andre Schurrle left Chelsea after only 19 months with the West London club on transfer deadline day. The 24-year-old agreed a four-and-a-half year contract with Wolfsburg at a reported fee of €29.4m.



LUHUKAY FIRED BY HERTHA

Struggling Hertha Berlin dispensed with the services of Dutch Coach Jos Luhukay when a February home loss to Bayer Leverkusen sent them into the relegation zone for the first time in the campaign. The Venlo-born boss previously helped Hertha gain promotion in 2012-13.



#BUNDESLOGO

The Bundesliga logo is famous for a silhouette of a player kicking the ball in an unorthodox fashion, and the league website set up a contest looking for fans to recreate that very pose for a chance to win some cool prizes.

DID YOU KNOW?

Champions Bayern became the first side in Bundesliga history to go through two consecutive first-halves of the season unbeaten.

Wolfsburg, Bayer Leverkusen and Bayern Munich all boast unbeaten home records at the halfway point of this season.

BY THE NUMBERS

25 Augsburg's total goals scored after 18 games, which is the quickest they've managed to reach that target in their top-flight history.



BAYERN THIRD RICHEST

Bayern Munich took third place overall in the 2013-14 Deloitte Money League behind Real Madrid and Manchester United thanks to an astounding €487.5m revenue. The closest domestic challengers on the list were Borussia Dortmund in 11th with an impressive €261.5m intake.

BY THE NUMBERS

4 Goals conceded by Bayern Munich in their opening 17 fixtures prior to the winter break.

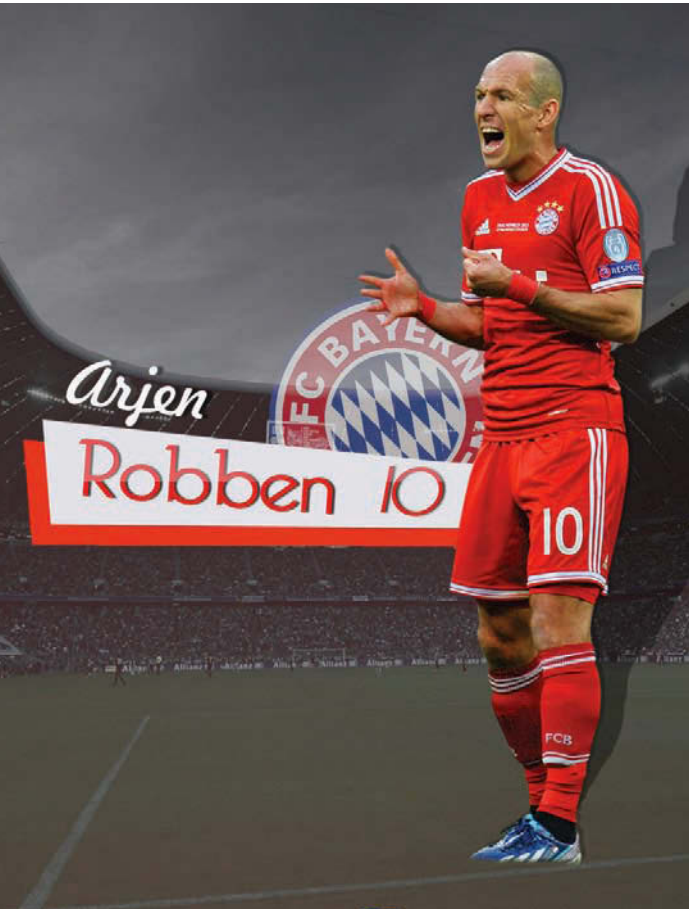


ANYTHING YOU CAN DO

German attacker Thomas Müller has been something of a hit on social media lately, when videos were posted of the Bayern Munich man impersonating the running style of Cristiano Ronaldo, much to the delight of his teammates, who watched and laughed as Müller exaggerated each stepover on the ball.

STRIKER REFUTES 'OVERWEIGHT' CLAIMS

Pierre-Michel Lasogga hit back at accusations his allegedly poor physical shape had been a major contributing factor towards a string of inconsistent performances. "I'm not too heavy, I've just got a bigger build," he told Bild. "I looked exactly the same last year and nobody was complaining then." Lasogga notched 13 times when helping HSV stave off relegation last term.



ROBBEN'S RIGHT FOOT

Everyone has Dutch winger Arjen Robben all figured out; the speedy Bayern Munich veteran picks up the ball out wide, cuts in and puts the ball on his left foot, beats a few defenders and cracks a shot on goal. While effective with his left boot, Robben revealed his teammates actually make fun of his right foot, since he rarely uses it!

DID YOU KNOW?

Gerd Muller holds the record for most number of Bundesliga goals scored in a single campaign with 40 – achieved during the 1971-72 season.

Bayern Munich have now been Winter Champions on 20 occasions.

The record for most participating campaigns in the Bundesliga is held by Hamburg, who are currently playing in their 52nd term.

Paderborn are the only current top-flight club enjoying their first attempt at the highest level.



RAKING IN THE EUROS

The Bundesliga recorded a tenth straight year of increased revenues in 2014, raking in a massive 2.45 billion euros last season, a 12.9 percent increase from last season. Still, the Bundesliga is struggling to attract a massive TV deal, bringing in just under 500 million euros compared to England's 5 billion pound deal.



RIBERY VERY CRITICAL OF BALLON D'OR

Bayern's Franck Ribery launched a stinging tirade on the political nature of voting for the Ballon d'Or that has seen either Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo pick up the award for each of the last seven years: "While Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi are playing, whoever is nominated third might as well accept they have no chance. It has to be asked whether it's worth bothering to go to the gala."

BACK TO THE

JUVENTUS VS. BORUSSIA DORTMUND

Persistent injuries meant that Lars Ricken never reached his full potential, yet one moment will forever endear the talented former German international to the Borussia Dortmund faithful.

Juventus' Alessandro Del Piero had reduced the deficit in the 1997 Champions League Final, following two Karl-Heinz Riedle goals. Ottmar Hitzfeld reacted by introducing the fresh-faced Dortmund native for Stephane Chapuisat. Just 16 seconds later, Ricken latched on to a pass from ex-Juve player Andreas Möller and with his first touch chipped Angelo Peruzzi to seal Dortmund's maiden European crown.

"I'd been sitting on the bench for 70 minutes, studying the game and I noticed that Angelo Peruzzi was always positioned far from his goal," the super-sub recently considered on that moment to FourFourTwo. "I turned to [teammate] Heiko Herrlich and said: 'If I come on, the first thing I'm going to do is shoot, no matter where I am'. That stayed in the back of my mind. It was simple in theory, putting it into practice was the hard part. Eight or nine attempts out of 10 wouldn't have gone in. But this one did – and that's what it's all about in big games." That iconic goal provided the final brushstroke to a rivalry prevalent throughout the 1990s.

Juventus and Borussia Dortmund had never met before 1993, but the 1997 Final was their seventh encounter. It would take nearly two decades to clash again, with the draw for this season's Round of 16 pitting the clubs together. Borussia topped a group containing Arsenal, while Juventus finished second to Atletico Madrid.

Their pairing this season has sparked memories of their prominent battles of two decades ago, starting with the 1992-93 UEFA Cup Final. The Westfalenstadion crowd was brought to its feet within 120 seconds of the first leg thanks to Michael Rummenigge, but the tie then became the Baggio show. Dino eradicated the deficit and Roberto netted in either half to give Giovanni Trapattoni's side a commanding advantage.

Dino repeated the trick in the second leg with two first half goals, before Möller finished the rout just past the hour. "That 93 Juve team was the best club side I've ever played against.....different planet", Ned Zelic once tweeted. The Australian featured in the second leg as his side suffered the biggest aggregate defeat in UEFA Cup Final history. Two seasons later the two sides were paired in the semi-finals of the same competition. It was one of two Italo-Germanic contests, with eventual champions Parma advancing past Bayer Leverkusen. For the first leg played in Milan, Die Schwarzgelben twice led and Juventus only claimed a 2-2 draw thanks to Jürgen Kohler's late goal. That meant the Italians had to win in Germany.

Both sides traded early goals, but the tie was decided by a piece of Roberto Baggio magic. The Divine Ponytail, whose corner was converted by Sergio Porrini, stepped up for a 31st minute free-kick. Superbly struck, it kissed the crossbar en route to goal to leave Stefan Klos as stunned as the packed Westfalenstadion. The captain gave a masterful performance and Juve were

through to another Final.

Days later they would win the Scudetto to qualify for the Champions League, there grouped with the newly crowned German champions. Dortmund hosted the Matchday 1 encounter and once again an early goal was scored – Möller popped up inside 60 seconds, but Michele Padovano soon levelled proceedings.

By September 1995 Baggio had swapped black and white for the red and black of Milan, but the Turin club had a new ace up their sleeve. On his Champions League debut Del Piero showed why he was considered a rising star by scoring one of his customary 'Zona Del Piero' goals, cutting in from the left and curling into the top corner. Antonio Conte sealed a 3-1 success.

Three further victories booked Juve's place in the last eight, but Dortmund had picked up just five points from four games as they headed to Turin's Stadio Delle Alpi. A goal in each half – including a foreshadowing Ricken goal – gave Hitzfeld's men a first win over the Bianconeri, despite Del Piero's late free-kick. The Old Lady would lift the trophy as Dortmund lost to eventual finalists Ajax. Back-to-back Bundesliga crowns offered the rising Germans another crack at the Champions League. Both they and the reigning champions strolled through the group phase and headed for Munich's Olympiastadion after negotiating the knockout stage.

Marcello Lippi's team were hot favourites. They had won their 24th Scudetto days earlier and travelled to Munich confident.



Left.

Juventus defeated Borussia Dortmund in four of their first five meetings, including the 1993 UEFA Cup Final. Roberto and Dino Baggio led the way with five of the six goals scored over the two legs.



THE NUMBERS.

Juventus: **4-2-1** against Borussia Dortmund

JUVENTUS
15
GOALS

DORTMUND
10
GOALS

FUTURE



MORE THAN 17 YEARS AFTER THEY LAST MET, JUVENTUS AND BORUSSIA DORTMUND WILL RENEW A RIVALRY WHICH CAPTIVATED IN THE 1990S. LUCA CETTA RECALLS THEIR BATTLES AS THEY FACE OFF IN THIS SEASON'S ROUND OF 16.



"Come the Final, we all saw Juventus as the best. And they had Zinedine Zidane. Before the game, Dortmund were given very little chance," current boss Jürgen Klopp remembers. Juventus had strengthened following their triumph and despite losing Gianluca Vialli and Fabrizio Ravanelli, recruited Zidane, Christian Vieri and Alen Boksic. Perhaps the one player they couldn't replace was midfielder Paulo Sousa, now wearing the yellow and black. He was one of four ex-Juve players to start the Final alongside Kohler, Möller and Stefan Reuter, with Julio Cesar not in the squad that evening.

Possibly Juventus arrived still in party mode. Yet it was supposed they were better prepared than Dortmund, who had been

criticised for losses which saw them relinquish the domestic crown. "In the lead-up to the Final," Hitzfeld recalls, "the media was full of negative stories, going on about the fact we had lost matches against Duisburg and Bielefeld rather than about our wins against Auxerre and Manchester United." Borussia weathered an early storm to take the lead when Paul Lambert fired the ball centrally for Riedle to finish. The ex-Lazio striker then powered a header past Peruzzi and Dortmund were in dreamland. Del Piero was summoned from the bench for the second half and delicately reduced the deficit with a backheel flick. But as quickly as the Bianconeri were back in it, Peruzzi turned his head in disbelief as Ricken's audacious lob sealed the crown. "Juventus had arrived as the sleek, expensive favourites," wrote the Daily Mail's Jeff Powell. "Italy's dowager football club and its black-and-white army of supporters were stunned into silent disbelief."

Bottom Left. Borussia Dortmund mixed dominant European form with a terrible start to the Bundesliga campaign which leaves them attempting to avoid relegation. Can Jürgen Klopp lead a domestic revival and continue their European march?

As Dortmund celebrated with a lap of honour, Kohler would drape a Juventus scarf around his neck thrown to him. It not only showed affection for his former club, but was a fitting end to a rivalry which had richly engrossed. Both clubs have experienced great highs and lows since 1997. Juve endured a Calciopoli-enforced relegation in 2006 and Dortmund were nearly declared bankrupt after years of financial mismanagement, but they have climbed back to the peak of their respective Leagues. Klopp's team were champions as recently as 2012 and Champions League finalists a year later, while Juventus have won the last three Serie A titles and are on track for a fourth. It's been a Bundesliga campaign to forget for the Black and Yellows, avoiding relegation their main aim. Yet they are quietly confident of advancing. "We are delighted [with the draw]," CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke said. "Regardless of the situation in both Leagues that's a 50-50 match. We'd take the result from the 1997 Final." Juventus director Pavel Nedved is not relying on Dortmund's domestic struggles: "Let us not underestimate Borussia, because they are a different team in Europe than what we see in Germany, with many classy players of a European level." The sense is both clubs acknowledge the closeness of the tie. That could give us a thrilling European showdown in the spirit of those memorable 1990s encounters.

ENGLISH CLUBS MEET THEIR PAST

Juventus versus Borussia Dortmund is not the only intriguing rematch of seasons past thrown up by the Round of 16 draw. Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain met in last season's quarter-finals, with the Londoners advancing on the away goals rule after a thrilling second leg comeback. When they first squared-off a decade ago in the group phase Chelsea were victorious in Paris, before a Stamford Bridge stalemate.

Manchester City lost both legs paired with Barcelona in the Round of 16 a year ago, succumbing 4-1 on aggregate. They will be hoping to even the ledger in their second consecutive knockout appearance.

Real Madrid are also pitted against one of the sides faced during their run to a triumphant night in Lisbon, taking on Schalke at the same stage as 2013-14. Carlo Ancelotti's team were dominant 9-2 aggregate victors, with Cristiano Ronaldo grabbing four goals over the two legs.

In other Round of 16 ties, Arsene Wenger leads Arsenal against his former club Monaco, while last term's finalists Atletico Madrid are expected to advance past Bayer Leverkusen. Bayern Munich will carry the German torch versus Shakhtar Donetsk and finally, Liverpool's conquerors Basel face Portuguese champions Porto.

"IT WAS SIMPLE IN THEORY, PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE WAS THE HARD PART. EIGHT OR NINE ATTEMPTS OUT OF 10 WOULDN'T HAVE GONE IN. BUT THIS ONE DID – AND THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT IN BIG GAMES."



LEAGUE ONE: **CONTENDERS**

DAVID vs

GOLIATH

The Ligue 1 chariot of the 2014/2015 season withholds a new battalion of contenders. Along with four-time French Champions Paris St Germain, two new prospects lay in wait. Lauren Maharaj writes..



Above: Paris St Germain, will look to tip Olympique de Marseille, and Olympique de Lyonnais to the title.

Olympique de Marseille and Olympique de Lyonnais, a pair of bitter rivals to one another as well to PSG. Yet, it is not only this football grouping which has painted a fortified picture of war, it is also a picture of French football that has been absent in recent past. A shift of power among the greatest talents in the country now presently takes course. The shuffle of podium leaders falls upon the laps of three of France's most popular, decorated and respected clubs. This rejuvenation in the league has created an incredible atmosphere for each clubs chanting fans as the title race embeds itself a new history for all three clubs quest for dominance. When comparing the two whose title together in combat is referred to as Choc de Olympiques (Clash of the Olympics), it is fair that in pursuit of the coveted Ligue 1 title we can symbolize both clubs as David who seeks perseverance over Goliath. In substitution of bad blood and religious representation, the "Olympico" clubs are in a level battle to overthrow the current throne of PSG. The Capital club represents the daunting task at hand for David, the modest and weaker opponent. But in some ways the analogy can only go so far on that

front. Both Olympico clubs have improved immensely in many aspects. Meaning, the threat of Paris has minimized compared to previous seasons, inviting one of the most entertaining seasons to date. Despite finishing the league in 6th place in 2013/2014, Marcelo Biesla's renaissance of Marseille has uplifted the players in ways that have been undone in past years. Since his arrival from Athletic Bilbao, Biesla's efforts to help propel Les Olympiens into Champions League football, but also dominate France has been ultimately successful thanks to Andre Pierre Gignac up front, Dimitri Payet in a role of creation and Andre Ayew to add horsepower. In solidifying defensive errors, top French international goalkeeper Steve Mandanda has captained the team exceptionally. Their growth as a squad under the Argentine has proved a true test for PSG as they have excelled to elevated heights over the current champions. As their history boasts, Marseille are the most adorned French club with over 100 years etched into the soul of the Stade de Velodrome. This includes nine Ligue 1 titles and the fact that Les Olympiens were the first French side to ever lift the Champions League trophy in 1993. Thus, their only probable comparison in competition

can come from Lyon-- the bloodless rival of epic proportion. As history re-writes itself for Marseille, history is providing momentum for Lyon. But not only history, young and prosperous talent as well. Alexandre Lacazette, one of Europe's most dazzling young talents who has sat atop Ligue 1's goal scorer spot since the start of 2015, has enticed clubs abroad with his ball control, box threats, pace and athleticism. A product of Lyon's youth system, Lacazette has flourished under a perfect wing. But besides the front man, Lyon is equipped with one of the best, yet overlooked goalkeepers in Anthony Lopes. His defining moment happened at the Stade Gerland against PSG in February when the Portuguese international sustained 637 minutes without conceding a goal. Lyon also sustains a strong footballing history, mostly seen in the 21st century. Les Gones not only boasts one of the best youth academies in France, but also the only French club to secure seven successive league titles starting in 2002. So, in the battle between David versus Goliath will financial and global power prevail? Or can history repeat itself in favour of the underdog? The thrill of this year's Ligue 1 title race displays just that.

THE DIFFERENCE MAKERS

French football has evolved immensely since the turn of the 21st century. A thrilling display of this shift came in the dominant reign of Olympique de Lyonnais between 2002-2008. Four of these years had harboured one of the world's most mouth watering strikers in Karim Benzema before his move to Real Madrid in 2009. This return to spotlight for Ligue 1 has once again unfolded, opening its doors to Europe in a dazzling fashion of talent. The only difference between then and now is the title race in France has its highest of stakes, demanding only the best of players.



Ezequiel Lavezzi (Paris St Germain)

As the dial turned to 2014, Ezequiel Lavezzi departing from the French capital would have been absurd, but since the beginnings of the 2014/2015 season, Lavezzi has been the understudy to the younger and more consistent Lucas Moura. When the 29 year old played alongside Edinson Cavani at Napoli, his hardworking attack/defensive duties along the wing were what caught the eye of Les Parisiens. Now his value has depreciated immensely to a reported £4 million, as he has been linked to ever-needy Liverpool. This does not discount his ability to reincarnate the form he once had, but now it should be on different turf. Lavezzi has always been known for his ability to create and score goals, but he is also very athletic; allowing any club of interest, particularly in England, to rely on him for a physical style of play. The Argentine has also always been a selfless player who looks for opportunities for his central forwards rather than his own tally. Since Lavezzi has been in tense waters with Paris over his 'no-show' stint in December during the clubs Winter Tour, his presence has been overshadowed.



Alexandre Lacazette (Olympique de Lyonnais)

Perhaps France's most coveted player to date, Alexandre Lacazette is a fruitful player whose potential is so vast that any club who adheres him would certainly have a brilliant mold to craft. According to Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas, Lacazette is 'better than Gareth Bale', extending the idea that the 23-year old is 'priceless'. One can certainly make a case that he is more valuable than the Welshman seeing as Lacazette has secured the top goal-scorer spot in Ligue 1 with a blistering 20 goals by January. As well he has helped Lyon climb atop the Ligue 1 throne regardless of their dreary start to the season. Lacazette is a graduate of the Lyon youth system, he has represented Les Bleus internationally on all youth and senior levels--but it's his technique that has left many defenders on their knees. Lacazette's frenetic style of play where he often plays along the wing, but travels through the middle as needed, is presently preserved for Lyon, but enticing to all of Europe. Lacazette is unarguably France's golden lure, as his destiny can only grow with magic at such a young age.



Andre-Pierre Gignac (Marseille)

Since coach Marcelo Biesla has joined Marseille from Athletic Bilbao, the Argentine has completely uplifted the power of the squad. The restoration of Marseille commenced in 2014 and particularly for Andre-Pierre Gignac, who has out played his bitter star rivals Paris St Germain. Sitting upon the top goal scorer spot most of the fall, prior to when Alexandre Lacazette de-throned him, the 29 year old wasn't far behind as January approached with a stunning 13 goals in second place. This is credited to his brilliant finishing ability, as he has been the ignition to a clockwork like-squad under Biesla. It is the first time in almost 3 seasons in France where L'OM may have a better edge to the the Ligue 1 crown over their financially gifted counterparts, PSG, igniting the rivalry for Le Classique to an all-time high. Gignac is a clinical part of this success and also a hot commodity for the rest Europe, England especially.



Joao Moutinho (Monaco)

Moutinho's growing frustration with the crumble of Monaco has been apparent since the start of the 2014/2015 season, but the 28 year old has been integral for the financial savvy club since his arrival in 2013. With a distinguished presence internationally for Portugal, Moutinho can play as a creative, defensive and even attacking midfielder. Moutinho thrives in the middle and since his time at Porto has been considered an eminent playmaker. It is displayed with pride how physical Moutinho plays when one watches him internationally; although he may not be a blossom of infancy, the experienced and consistent midfielder would be a fine addition to any team seeking midfield maintenance.



Nabil Fekir (Lyon)

The French-Algerian diamond is another example of quality attacking midfielders out of France. At only 21, Nabil Fekir has become an essential component to the dynamic Lyon side of 2014/2015. His partnership with Europe's most dazzling frontman, Alexandre Lacazette has made him claim outstanding skills that will only prosper with time. Fekir's senior career had only launched in 2013 at Lyon, where he spent five years in 2 periods as apart of the youth system. Presently in his second season with the Les Gones, Fekir had incredibly reached the third spot for top goal scorer by January with 8 goals and 5 assists. He remains a vital part of the team, withholding an 83.7% passing average and strength in through balls, possession and dribbling.



Dimitri Payet (Marseille)

Since his inconsistent stint with Lille, Dimitri Payet has been reinvented. The attacking midfielder is undoubtedly one of Ligue 1's most satisfying players. A brightly gifted player with exceptional dribbling skills and play making abilities. His partnership with Andre-Pierre Gignac, this season has been the spine of Marseille's attack. Payet is a midfielder who stays fluid with choice, particularly down the middle, but when necessary he takes flight along the wings. The French international is also an expert at long ball passes and completes an average of 80.8% of essential passes in Ligue 1, according to ESPN. His vision for creation within the midfield is top level and mouth watering for building attacks. With 5 goals and 9 assists achieved halfway through the season, it is difficult to avoid the spotlight that has cast itself atop the midfielder.



Zlatan Ibrahimovic (PSG)

The talismanic Swede is unprecedented in style, creativity and power; but his age has certainly caught up with him. At 33 years old, Paris and the man himself must create a formula for his well being or eventual next move from the capital. Zlatan has stated his allure of the MLS from the likes of Thierry Henry, but with the New York Red Bulls frontman now retired, will Ibra still have the same interest? Not only this, but since the turn of 2014, the talisman has suffered multiple injuries and displayed the side effects of lack of rest. Will clubs still find full value in these set backs? The truth is he is no longer able to be the main event for a club. This is true especially after his time consuming recovery, resulting in lethargic performances for Paris after his struggle with a heel injury in the fall. Thus, would a move to the MLS suit Zlatan? A regression of competition as well as much quieter fandom could soothe the soul of the aging superstar. However, the truth beholds that until his contract with PSG expires in 2016, we will not know.



LIGUE 1 WINNERS

2014: Paris St. Germain
2013: Paris St. Germain
2012: Montpellier
2011: Lille

2010: Marseille
2009: Bordeaux
2008: Lyon
2007: Lyon
2006: Lyon
2005: Lyon



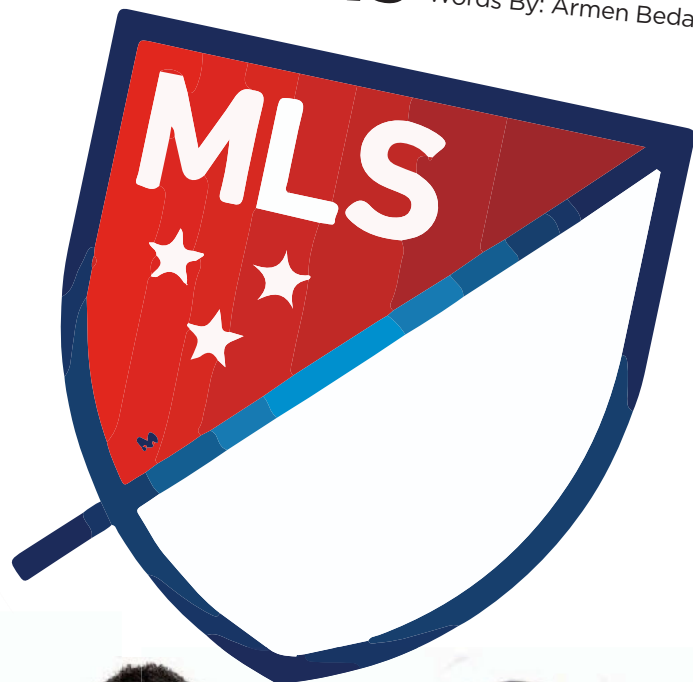
2015 MLS SEASON PREVIEW

1 LEAGUE • 2 CONFERENCES • 20 TEAMS

Words By: Armen Bedakian

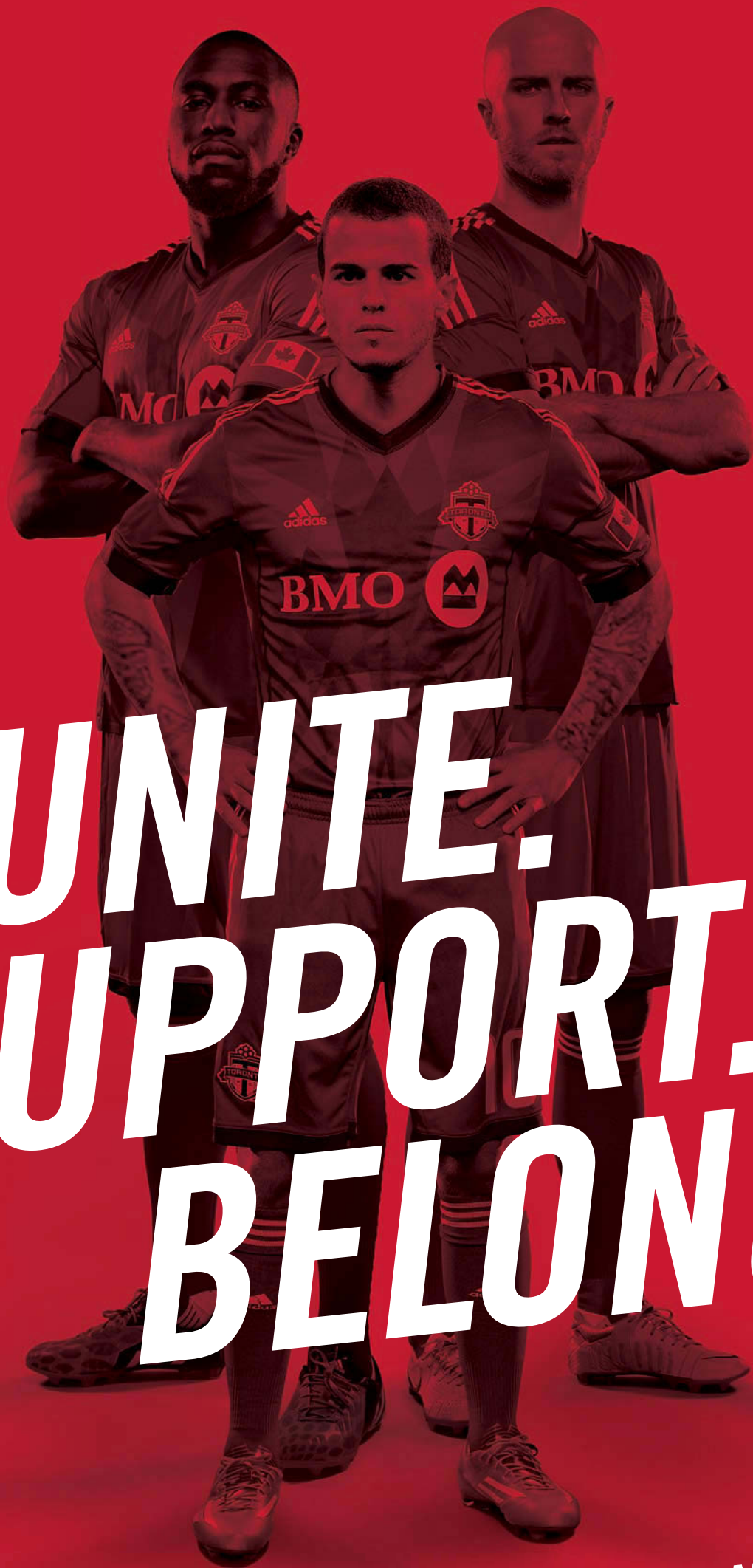
Major League Soccer will be the home to some of the world's biggest star players this year, as Kaká, David Villa, Steven Gerrard, Sebastian Giovinco, Frank Lampard and many more duke it out in the United States and Canada in the 2015 season. With a new look and a new logo, MLS is entering what might be considered the third era in this, its 20th season since its inception in 1996. The beautiful game hasn't stopped growing in MLS and this season promises to not only be one of the most exciting, but also one of the toughest to predict. Each team has grown in strength and skill, U.S. internationals like Jozy Altidore,

Michael Bradley, Clint Dempsey and many more now call MLS home, and the competition for the MLS Cup is harder and tougher than ever before. Will new expansion teams Orlando City SC and New York City FC make a splash in their first season in MLS? Can Toronto FC find redemption with Giovinco, Bradley and Altidore? Will the LA Galaxy continue to dominate and win a sixth MLS Cup title? We break down the 20 teams fighting the battle for 2015 MLS glory.





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MLS EAST: **CHICAGO FIRE**

CHICAGOFIRE

Nicknames: The Fire, Men in Red // **Ultras:** Section 8



Founded: 1997
Stadium: Toyota Park, Bridgeview, Illinois
MLS Titles: 1
Best Season Finish: 1st overall - 2003



BY THE NUMBERS

CHICAGO FIRE LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 9th

League: 15th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

East: 6th

League: 12th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

East: 4th

League: 6th

Playoffs: Knockout Round

2011

East: 6th

League: 11th

Playoffs: DNQ

2010

East: 4th

League: 10th

Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer: Ante Razov (76)

All-Time Record: 222-180-129

MLS Playoff Appearances: 12



CLUB LEGEND: PIOTR NOWAK

The Fire has had a number of top MLS players but the one who stands out comes from the club's inaugural season: Polish international captain and central midfielder Piotr Nowak played for Chicago from 1998-2002 and was an instrumental figure in winning the MLS Cup in the club's first season.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

What can we say about the Chicago Fire? This franchise kicked off in 1998 with a bang, winning the MLS Cup in its inaugural season, but since those glory days, the Fire have faded year after year. The Fire capped off a miserable 2014 season with a ninth place finish in the Eastern Conference, finishing with eight more points than the Montreal Impact but winning the same amount of games – only six, to be exact. For the Chicago Fire finding that winning form again is the primary mission. The club simply cannot afford another poor year in MLS, that's for certain.



ONE TO WATCH: HARRY SHIPP

Young hotshot forward/winger Harry Shipp made headlines in 2014 for his blistering rookie season, a year that saw him score seven goals. Shipp is a talented attacking option and a player who has all the tools to grow into a top player in Chicago, who signed him as a homegrown player.

"FOR ME IT'S ALWAYS AN EXCITING TIME AND IT'S GETTING HARDER AND HARDER TO MAKE THE PLAYOFFS,"

– Frank Yallop on 2015 season.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 5th vs. Norwich City (Norwich, England)

Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. Van. Whitecaps (Portland, OR)

Season Opener: Mar. 6th @ L.A. Galaxy

Home Opener: Mar. 14th vs. Van. Whitecaps

Final Game: Oct. 25th vs. NY Red Bulls



THE COACH: FRANK YALLOP

Few head coaches in the league have had as much experience as Canadian manager Frank Yallop, who took over as the head coach of the Chicago Fire in 2013. The Fire will need all the wisdom they can get from Yallop, too, as the team continues to stutter in its growth.



STAR MAN: MIKE MAGEE

He's a local of Chicago, Illinois, and a proven talent in MLS. For the Chicago Fire, there is no player more important than Mike Magee, who has scored 22 goals in 39 games for the club. Magee made his name at the LA Galaxy but returned home to Chicago in 2013.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Chicago Fire got its name from the infamous Chicago fire of 1871 and the club's log was also inspired by the badges worn by fire departments in the city. The team also shares a name with a hit TV show, making it the hardest team to search for online.



BY THE NUMBERS

COLUMBUS CREW LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 3rd

League: 7th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2013

West: 8th

League: 16th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

West: 6th

League: 10th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: 4th

League: 9th

Playoffs: WILD CARD

2010

West: 2nd

League: 4th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Jeff Cunningham (64)

All-Time Record: 247-232-111

MLS Playoff Appearances: 12



CLUB LEGEND: GUILLERMO BARROS SCHELOTTO

Federico Higuain may be the club's current Argentine midfield general but he still has some work to do to take the perch as club legend away from Guillermo Barros Schelotto, who dominated the league from 2007-2010. Schelotto set the precedent and paved the road for Argentine talent in MLS, too.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Columbus Crew underwent a facelift in time for the 2015 season by replacing its iconic three-man construction worker logo for a new, sleek circular badge. The team also updated its name, adding the words "Soccer Club" or "SC" for short, while retaining its infamous yellow and black colours.



Founded: 1994
Stadium: Columbus Crew Stadium, Columbus, OH
MLS Titles: 1
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2009



MLS EAST: COLUMBUS CREW



COLUMBUS CREW

Nickname: The Crew // Ultras: The Nordecke



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

For the Columbus Crew, the 2015 season represents a big opportunity to revive the club's glory days. With the introduction of New York City FC and Orlando City SC into the Eastern Conference, the league balanced the tables by moving the Houston Dynamo and Sporting Kansas City over to the West. This opens the door for the Columbus Crew to challenge for a top spot in the conference and even for an MLS Supporter's Shield. With a solid cast of players and a motivated squad, the Columbus Crew are certainly the heavyweights of the Eastern Conference in 2015, should they continue playing their exciting, attacking brand of football.



ONE TO WATCH: KEI KAMARA

A familiar face returned to MLS this season, joining Columbus ahead of the 2015 season: Kei Kamara, one of the league's most electric personalities, returns to Columbus, where he first started his MLS career back in 2006. Kamara will certainly be one to watch both on the field and off of it!



THE COACH: GREGG BERHALTER

Head coach Gregg Berhalter enters his second full season with the Columbus Crew and expectations are high on the former LA Galaxy defender as the Crew face new challenges in the Eastern Conference. There is faith in Berhalter after he guided the Crew to a third in the East finish and a spot in the playoffs.



STAR MAN: FEDERICO HIGUAIN

As an organization, the Columbus Crew have had seemingly endless amounts of luck signing players from South America and that trend continues with current star man Federico Higuain. The brother of Argentine international Gonzalo Higuain, Federico is, perhaps, one of the finest attacking midfielders and passing visionaries in MLS today.

"FEDERICO [HIGUAIN] HAS BEEN A PRIORITY OF OURS SINCE I CAME ON. WE SAW HIS IMPACT ON THE GROUP AND WHAT HE CAN DO IN THIS LEAGUE, AND IT WAS A PRIORITY OF OURS TO KEEP HIM WITH THE CLUB AND REWARD HIM FOR HIS IMPACT."

- Gregg Berhalter on re-signing Federico Higuain.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 13th vs. F.C. Dallas (Austin, TX)

Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. TBA (Bradenton, FL)

Season Opener: Mar. 7th @ Houston Dynamo

Home Opener: Mar. 14th vs. Toronto F.C.

Final Game: Oct. 25th vs. D.C. United



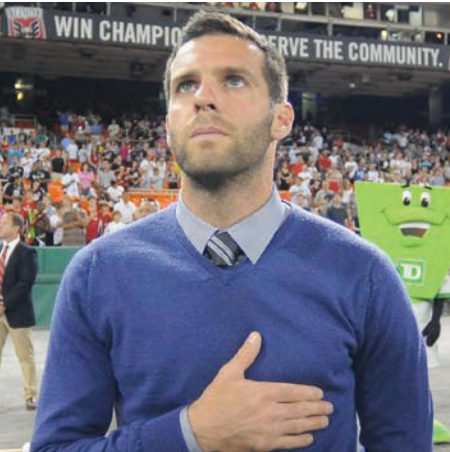
MLS EAST: **D.C. UNITED**

D.C. UNITED



Founded: 1995
Stadium: RFK Stadium, Washington D.C.
MLS Titles: 4
Best Season Finish: 1st Overall - 2009

Nicknames: Black-and-Red, DCU // Ultras: La Barra Brava, The Screaming Eagles, La Norte, District Ultras.



THE COACH: BEN OLSEN

Ben Olsen was, far and away, the best head coach in MLS last season, and earned the MLS Coach of the Year nod for it. He took D.C. United from last place to first over one offseason and this year, Olsen will keep pushing his squad toward further glories, with both eyes on the MLS Cup!

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The quintessential underdog story turned to reality last season with D.C. United. In 2013, D.C. was down and out, bottom of the table, but turned it around and head into the 2015 season as one of the power players in Major League Soccer. With a solid core of talented players in their prime, D.C. United will look to go further in the MLS playoffs this season and challenge, again, for the MLS Cup. It's been a long time since D.C. United reached these heights but the most heralded team at the birth of the league is back with a fury and they are not to be underestimated in 2015.



ONE TO WATCH: PERRY KITCHEN

D.C. United drafted Perry Kitchen back in 2011 but since then, this young central defensive midfielder has become the rock from which D.C. has built its empire. Kitchen has tremendous potential and could just become a U.S. international if he can improve on his 2014 form and continue to grow.

"THIS IS A LONG SEASON, AND WE'VE GOT TO ADD BETTER DEPTH AND GUYS THAT UNDERSTAND HOW TO WIN GAMES IF WE'RE GOING TO HAVE SUCCESS. WE HAVE TO CHANGE OUT BODIES AND RELY ON OTHER PEOPLE. WE CANNOT GRIND THE SAME TEAM OUT THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE YEAR,"

- Ben Olsen on building depth for 2015 season.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Jan. 30th vs. Orlando City (Chicago, IL)
Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 20th vs. FC Dallas (Dallas, TX)
Season Opener: Mar. 7th vs. Montreal Impact
Home Opener: Mar. 7th vs. Montreal Impact
Final Game: Oct. 25th @ Columbus Crew

BY THE NUMBERS

D.C. UNITED LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 1st
League: 3rd
Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2013

East: 10th
League: 19th
Playoffs: DNQ

2012

East: 2nd
League: 3rd
Playoffs: SEMI FINALS

2011

East: 7th
League: 14th
Playoffs: DNQ

2010

East: 8th
League: 16th
Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer:
Jaime Moreno (131)

All-Time Record: 249-236-109
MLS Playoff Appearances: 10

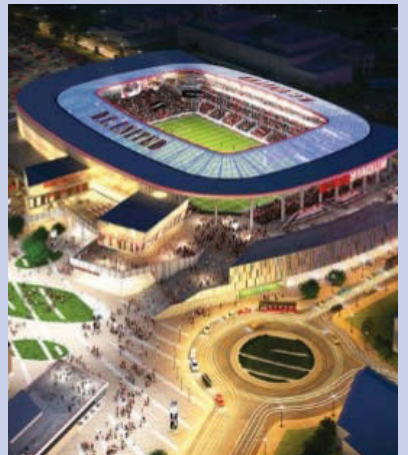


CLUB LEGEND: JAIME MORENO

No one player better represents the pride of D.C. United's large supporters group than Jaime Moreno. He has the most games, goals and assists in the club's history and was the team MVP in 2004 and 2008. Moreno was also a Bolivian international and scored 131 career goals with D.C. United.

DID YOU KNOW?

D.C. United will be moving into a new stadium in 2017 after campaigning for new digs since 2006. The club and its supporters have been desperate for a soccer-specific stadium for a long time now and that dream is finally coming to fruition at Buzzard Point, to the tune of \$300 million!



STAR MAN: BILL HAMID

D.C. United is a team built from the sum of its parts, making it quite difficult to choose a real star player here. Luis Silva and Eddie Johnson make up the attack, while Bobby Boswell shores up the back line, but it is goalkeeper Bill Hamid who has the brightest future, with a U.S. international career ahead of him, too.

BY THE NUMBERS

MONTREAL IMPACT LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 10th

League: 19th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

West: 5th

League: 11th

Playoffs: KNOCKOUT ROUND

2012

West: 7th

League: 12th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: N/A

League: N/A

Playoffs: N/A

2010

West: N/A

League: N/A

Playoffs: N/A

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Marco Di Vaio (40)

All-Time Record:

32-46-24

MLS Playoff Appearances:

1



CLUB LEGEND: MARCO DI VAIO

The Montreal Impact have been in Major League Soccer for only a few years now but already, there stands amongst them a couple big players: Alessandro Nesta might be the most well-known player but it was Marco Di Vaio who pulled this team up from its bootstraps and retires, now, a legend in Quebec.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Montreal Impact's owner, Joey Saputo, owns a major dairy operation in Canada and is also the owner of Italian Serie A club Bologna FC. We'll spare the bologna-and-cheese-sandwich jokes but suffice it to say, Saputo has some major connections in Italy that could pay off for Montreal.



Founded: 2010
Stadium: Saputo Stadium, Montreal, Quebec
MLS Titles: 0
Best Finish: 11th - 2013



MLS EAST: MONTREAL IMPACT



MONTREAL IMPACT

Nickname: L'impact de Montreal // Ultras: Ultras Montreal (UM02)



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Simply put, the 2015 season has to be better for the Montreal Impact. After a dismal 2014 that saw the Impact sit last in the league, this Canadian franchise has to put in double overtime shifts to right the ship and find some winning form once more. The Impact will look to build on its measly six wins last season but have hope in the form of a number of new players, especially in the back line after signing Belgian international Laurent Ciman. Without talismanic striker Marco Di Vaio, the Impact will also need to learn how to score again, too.



ONE TO WATCH: LAURENT CIMAN

Defensively, Montreal needed a new look in the back line and the Impact addressed that need with a big pick up in the form of Belgian international Laurent Ciman. The former Standard Liege centerback instantly gives Montreal a leader in defence and at 29, he is also a long-term option for the Impact.



THE COACH: FRANK KLOPAS

Head coach Frank Klopas has some MLS experience under his belt, having coached the Chicago Fire up until the 2014 season, and he goes into his second season at the club hoping to reinforce a number of key positions to avoid another last-place finish. Klopas has a plan, no doubt, but can he pull it off? That remains to be seen.



STAR MAN: IGNACIO PIATTI

Last season was a bit of a disaster for the Montreal Impact but there was a silver lining at the tail end of the year in the form of Designated Player signing Ignacio Piatti. The creative attacking winger/midfielder came to Montreal late in the season but offered the Impact a much more threatening presence in the final third.

"IN TERMS OF BUSINESS, MARKETING, SALES, ETC., WE CAN HELP BOLOGNA, AND I CAN USE MY PEOPLE AT THE IMPACT TO HELP THEM; FOR PLAYERS, THERE CAN BE SYNERGY."

- owner Joey Saputo on Bologna-Montreal relationship.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 19th vs. Fluminense FC (Orlando, FL)

Final Pre-Season Game: Mar. 1st vs. TBA (Orlando, FL)

Season Opener: Mar. 7th @ D.C. United

Home Opener: Mar. 28th vs. Orlando City

Final Game: Oct. 25th vs. Toronto FC



MLS EAST: NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION

NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION



Founded: 1995
Stadium: Gillette Stadium, Foxborough MA.
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 2nd Overall - 2005

Nicknames: The Revs // Ultras: Midnight Riders, The Rebellion, The Rev Army



THE COACH: JAY HEAPS

When head coach Jay Heaps took over at the New England Revolution, it didn't take him long to find his way around Gillette Stadium. See, Heaps had played with the Revs for 10 years, signing with the club in 2001. He's a natural fit and a great leader, and took his side all the way to the MLS Cup finals in 2014, too.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The 2015 season is a promising one for the New England Revolution, who go into the campaign feeling more than prepared with the cast of characters the club has assembled from last year onward. The Revs can't repeat the same mistakes made last season, though; the club looked set on crashing out in 2014 with a long string of losses but luckily turned it around late in the season and took that momentum all the way to the finals. In 2015, more consistency and a sharper killer instinct will be needed if MLS Cup glory will finally be theirs.



ONE TO WATCH: KELYN ROWE

The 2014 season saw Lee Nguyen break out and become a star and 2015 might just offer Kelyn Rowe that same opportunity. Rowe is an exciting winger who has the skill and drive to become a force in MLS, and while he's a known quality now, he has the potential to get to another level. Keep an eye out for this young star!

"I THINK IT'S ALWAYS NICE TO WIN. IF YOU WIN, EVERYBODY IS HAPPY AND YOU CAN LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT GAME, AND YOU KNOW TORONTO IN THE PLAYOFFS WILL BE HARD"

- Jermaine Jones on a potential 2015 playoff bracket



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Jan. 31st vs. Real Salt Lake (Salt Lake City, UT)

Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs.

Season Opener: Mar. 8th @ Seattle Sounders

Home Opener: Mar. 21st vs. Montreal Impact

Final Game: Oct. 25th @ New York City F.C.

BY THE NUMBERS

NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 1st

League: 2nd

Playoffs: FINALS

2013

East: 3rd

League: 6th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2012

East: 9th

League: 15th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

East: 9th

League: 18th

Playoffs: DNQ

2010

East: 6th

League: 12th

Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Taylor Twellman (101)

All-Time Record: 225-255-115

MLS Playoff Appearances: 11



CLUB LEGEND: TAYLOR TWELLMAN

For this New England Revolution striker, life after soccer has made him more famous, perhaps, than his time on the field. Taylor Twellman is everyone's favourite soccer analyst at ESPN but he spent a number of years up top for the Revs, scoring over 100 goals for New England.

DID YOU KNOW?

The New England Revolution has one of the most interesting goal scoring celebrations in the league. When a player scores a goal for New England, four soldiers dressed in clothing from the era of the American Revolution point rifles to the sky and fire a round in salute!



STAR MAN: LEE NGUYEN

There's not really a Tom Brady character in the Revolution locker room, since this is a team formed from the sum of its parts rather than from individual merit. If we had to pick a star man, it would be U.S. international Lee Nguyen, but don't forget Charlie Davies and Jermaine Jones either!

BY THE NUMBERS

THE 2015 MLS SEASON WILL BE
NEW YORK CITY'S DEBUT SEASON



CLUB LEGEND: FRANK LAMPARD / DAVID VILLA

No club legends yet, since New York is kicking things off in 2015, but you can bet David Villa and/or Frank Lampard will be making headlines by season's end if they manage to adjust to Major League Soccer quickly. These signings indicate a huge gain for the city of New York and the two could become instant legends.

DID YOU KNOW?

New York City FC is actively searching for a stadium deal within the five boroughs but until the club finds a location, this team will be playing in a historical location, Yankee Stadium. Playing soccer in a fabled baseball field may be strange at first but New Yorkers won't really mind.



Founded: 2013
Stadium: Yankee Stadium, New York, NY
MLS Titles: 0
Best Finish: n/a



MLS EAST: NEW YORK CITY



NEW YORK CITY FC

Nickname: NYCFC // Ultras: The Third Rail



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Here begins the story, perhaps, of one of Major League Soccer's biggest teams; New York City FC kicks off as an expansion club in the 2015 season and has already made huge waves with the signings of a pair of big Designated Players. The club, co-owned by the New York Yankees and English Premier League outfit Manchester City, will don the familiar sky blue colours of its parent club, but New York won't just be Manchester City Jr. – the club has forged an identity of its own and looks to be a threat right off the bat this season.



ONE TO WATCH: FRANK LAMPARD

He won't be here until July, but come the summer transfer window and the end of the Premier League season New York City will also welcome the services of English midfielder Frank Lampard. The Chelsea icon, now at Manchester City, will give New York an instant boost of quality in midfield.



THE COACH: JASON KREIS

Jason Kreis has been away from the MLS picture for a couple years now, but for good reason. The former Real Salt Lake coach, who won the MLS Cup in 2009, joined expansion franchise New York City FC and is considered one of the sharpest minds in all of MLS.

"[LAMPARD] IS A GUY WHO HAS PRETTY USEFUL TOOLS: HE'S DYNAMIC, HE'S CREATIVE, HARD WORKING, HE'S ABLE IN THE MIDDLE TO GIVE US THAT TECHNICALITY AND MOVEMENT WE'RE LOOKING FOR. FOR ME, HE'S AN EXTREMELY EXCITING PLAYER."

- Jason Kreis on Frank Lampard joining in 2015.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 1st vs. Jacksonville Armada (Jacksonville, FL)

Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. Charleston Battery (Charleston, SC)

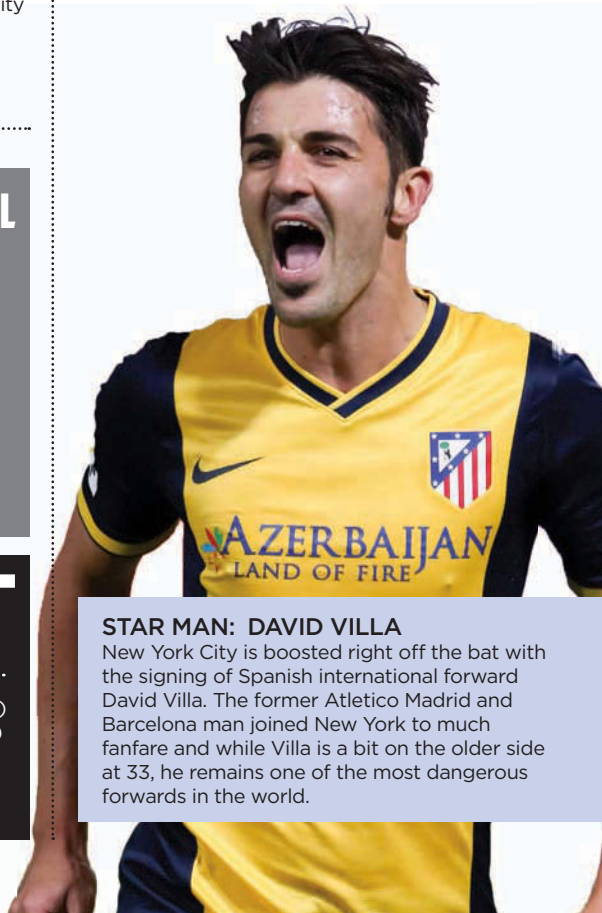
Season Opener: Mar. 8th @ Orlando City SC

Home Opener: Mar. 15th vs. New England Revolution

Final Game: Oct. 25th vs. New England Revolution

STAR MAN: DAVID VILLA

New York City is boosted right off the bat with the signing of Spanish international forward David Villa. The former Atletico Madrid and Barcelona man joined New York to much fanfare and while Villa is a bit on the older side at 33, he remains one of the most dangerous forwards in the world.





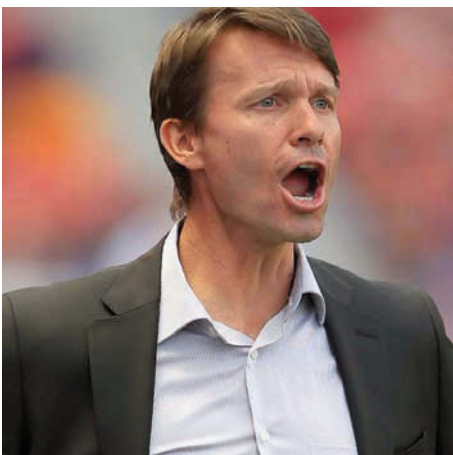
MLS EAST: NEW YORK RED BULLS

NEW YORK RED BULLS



Founded: 1995
Stadium: Red Bull Arena, Harrison, NJ.
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 1st Overall - 2013

Nicknames: Red Bulls, Metros // Ultras: Empire Supporters Group, Viking Army, Garden State Ultras



THE COACH: JESSE MARSCH

Followers of the league will remember the New York Red Bulls' new head coach Jesse Marsch from his time at the Montreal Impact and while Marsch is a fine choice to replace an outgoing coach, Red Bulls fans weren't pleased with the appointment. Mike Petke remains a fan favourite and his dismissal did not go down well with New York's supporters.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

After a tumultuous offseason, 2015 might just be a year to forget for the New York Red Bulls. The team's key man, Thierry Henry, stepped away and retired from the beautiful game after a storied career for both club and country, leaving the Red Bulls looking to pick up the pieces and rebuild this season. That job was made instantly more difficult after head coach Mike Petke was fired, much to the dismay of the Red Bull faithful, who believe Petke deserved to stay on as head coach of the club. It all makes for a bit of nervousness at Red Bull Arena.



ONE TO WATCH: SACHA KLJESTAN

Without Thierry Henry, the New York Red Bulls will have big shoes to fill when it comes to a star man. For now former U.S. international Sacha Kljestan - who returns to the league from Anderlecht - will be looking to be a force to be reckoned with in the middle of the park.

"I JUST WANTED TO CALL IN TO TELL EVERYBODY THANK YOU SO MUCH. YOU'VE BEEN MY HEART AND SOUL FOR A LONG TIME. AND THAT'S SOMETHING THAT I'LL NEVER FORGET, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS."

- former head coach Mike Petke



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 1st vs. Uni. of South Florida (Orlando, FL)
Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. TBA (Bradenton, FL)
Season Opener: Mar. 8th @ Sporting KC
Home Opener: Mar. 22nd vs. D.C. United
Final Game: Oct. 25th @ Chicago Fire

BY THE NUMBERS

NEW YORK RED BULLS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 4th

League: 8th

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2013

East: 1st

League: 1st

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2012

East: 3rd

League: 5th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2011

East: 5th

League: 10th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2010

East: 1st

League: 3rd

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Juan Pablo Ángel (58)

All-Time Record: 235-244-121

MLS Playoff Appearances: 15



CLUB LEGEND: THIERRY HENRY

He's an icon in New York, in France and in Arsenal. Yes, there really is only one Thierry Henry, a king among strikers, a leader among his teammates, and a player who was able to capture the hearts of fans across the MLS. Henry steps away from the game the very definition of a legend, and his time in New York won't soon be forgotten.

DID YOU KNOW?

Before they were the Red Bulls, this New York team went by the name New York/New Jersey MetroStars. The club also paved the way for a number of U.S. internationals, including Michael Bradley and Jozy Altidore, who are now with Toronto FC.



BY THE NUMBERS

THE 2015 MLS SEASON WILL BE ORLANDO CITY'S DEBUT SEASON



CLUB LEGEND: BREK SHEA

Like New York, the story of this club's legendary players has yet to be written but the best chance right off the bat is Kaká. However, U.S. international Brek Shea has also joined the club and he has a chance to revitalize his career in Orlando. If Shea finds his form once more, he could make a case here, too.

DID YOU KNOW?

Orlando City SC's owner, Flavio Augusto da Silva, is a Brazilian multimillionaire who is also good friends with Kaká! When he purchased the rights to an MLS franchise in Florida, the first move he made was to make a phone call to the Real Madrid and A.C. Milan man, who obliged and joined him in Orlando.



Founded: 2013
Stadium: Citrus Bowl, Orlando, FL
MLS Titles: 0
Best Finish: n/a



MLS EAST: ORLANDO CITY SC

ORLANDO CITY SC

Nickname: The Lions // Ultras: Iron Lions Firm, The Ruckus



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

New York City isn't the only new team joining the league in 2015: Orlando City Soccer Club will also be kicking off this season, bringing Major League Soccer back to Florida! Orlando earned the expansion franchise due to a strong pitch and the fans in Orlando quickly embraced their new side. With a unique look, decked out in purple jerseys and logos, Orlando is a unique new team that already features a healthy core of MLS experienced players, and one pretty big soccer star, too. Orlando is expecting to accomplish big things in 2015 in a tough Eastern Conference.



ONE TO WATCH: BRYAN ROCHEZ

Orlando City signed a second Designated Player in 20-year-old Honduran forward Bryan Rochez. The former Real España man joins Orlando despite plenty of offers from other MLS clubs and is a full senior international with Honduras despite his age. This young DP is certain one to watch!



THE COACH: ADRIAN HEATH

Manager Adrian Heath is a familiar name for those who follow soccer in Orlando; he was the head coach of Orlando City during the club's days in the USL and retained his role as head coach when the team made the jump to MLS. Heath brings years of experience to the job and is the perfect fit for this expansion side.

"TO LIVE IN ORLANDO WILL BE GREAT, FOR SURE. BEFORE, I JUST KNEW ORLANDO AS A DISNEY CITY, AND NOW I'M CHANGING. I'VE BEEN TO ORLANDO TWICE OUTSIDE DISNEY, WITH FRIENDS TO KNOW THE CITY."

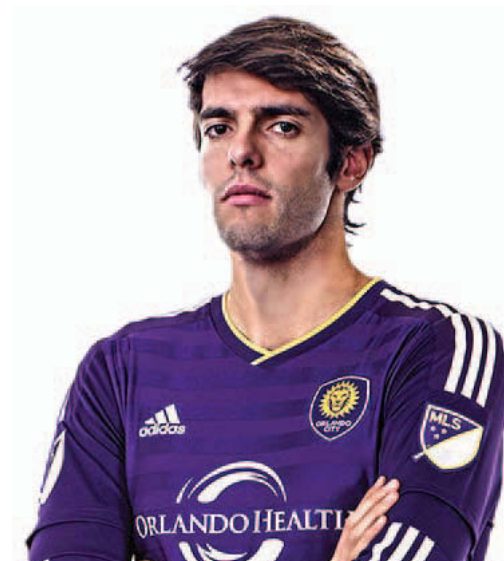
- Jason Kreis on Frank Lampard joining in 2015.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Jan. 30th vs. D.C. United (Bradenton, FL)
Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. Huston Dynamo (Charleston, SC)
Season Opener: Mar. 8th vs New York City FC
Home Opener: Mar. 8th vs New York City FC
Final Game: Oct. 25th @ Philadelphia Union



STAR MAN: KAKÁ

There is one star man at Orlando and what a star he is: Brazilian midfielder Kaká, winner of a FIFA Ballon D'Or and once considered the best player in the world, joined this new expansion franchise in Orlando as the club's marquee player and will be the one this squad is built around in the years to come.



MLS EAST: PHILADELPHIA UNION

PHILADELPHIA UNION



Founded: 2008
Stadium: PPL Park, Chester, PA.
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 8th Overall - 2011

Nicknames: Zolos, The U // Ultras: Sons of Ben



THE COACH: JIM CURTIN

Head coach Jim Curtin is no stranger to life at the helm of the Philadelphia Union, having taken over last year after spending 2013 as the assistant to John Hackworth. Curtin now has a year under his belt as the main man and he'll be looking to improve on his first season with a solid showing in 2015.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

There has been plenty of turmoil in the Philadelphia Union's history in Major League Soccer. The club's first head coach, Piotr Nowak, built the club from the bottom up and then blew things up when it went wrong; John Hackworth tried to piece the team back together but couldn't, and now Jim Curtin has taken over and tried to make do with what he's got. The Union remain a threat in the Eastern Conference but might be slowly falling behind as more and more DPs join teams in the East; to compete, major changes are still needed in Philadelphia.



ONE TO WATCH: ANDRE BLAKE

Young Jamaican goalkeeper Andre Blake is the top prospect in the Philadelphia Union's ranks, and for good reason; Blake is already a Jamaican international and is also a member of Generation Adidas. He was selected first overall in the 2014 MLS SuperDraft, too, coming out of UConn.

"WE WANT TO BE BASTARDS IN THE LAST 15 MINUTES OF GAMES AND DO WHAT IT TAKES AND CLOSE [TEAMS] OUT. WHETHER THAT IS DELAYING THINGS, TAKING A SMART FOUL TO SLOW THE GAME DOWN, WHATEVER IT MIGHT BE, WE HAVE TO DO WHAT IT TAKES. IT'S SOMETHING WE STRUGGLED WITH AS A CLUB FOR FIVE YEARS, IT WASN'T JUST LAST SEASON AND IT'S TIME FOR IT TO STOP."

- Jim Curtin on his side's attitude for 2015.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 7th vs. Jacksonville Armada (Jacksonville, FL)
Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. TBA (Bradenton, FL)
Season Opener: Mar. 7th vs. Colorado Rapids
Home Opener: Mar. 7th vs. Colorado Rapids
Final Game: Oct. 25th vs. Orlando City SC

BY THE NUMBERS

PHILADELPHIA UNION LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 6th

League: 12th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

East: 7th

League: 14th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

East: 8th

League: 15th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

East: 3rd

League: 8th

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2010

East: 7th

League: 14th

Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Sébastien Le Toux (39)

All-Time Record:

51-65-50

MLS Playoff Appearances: 1



CLUB LEGEND:

SÉBASTIEN LE TOUX

The Philadelphia Union hasn't been in Major League Soccer for very long, having joined the league in 2008, but there are a number of players who are near and dear to the Union faithful; Sebastien Le Toux is the first player who comes to mind and there's plenty of respect for Danny Califf, the club's first captain.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Philadelphia Union has a strong connection with the U.S. founding fathers; its logo features 13 stars for the original 13 U.S. colonies. Even the club's name, Union, is a nod to the union of those colonies and the club's motif is a snake, a symbol in the time period and its "join or die" mantra.



BY THE NUMBERS

TORONTO FC LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 7th
League: 13th
Playoffs: DNQ

2013

West: 9th
League: 17th
Playoffs: DNQ

2012

West: 10th
League: 19th
Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: 8th
League: 16th
Playoffs: DNQ

2010

West: 5th
League: 11th
Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Dwayne De Rosario (33)

All-Time Record:

62-120-74

MLS Playoff Appearances:

0



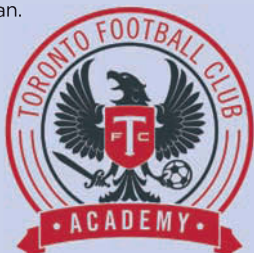
CLUB LEGEND:

MICHAEL BRADLEY

Toronto FC has had a number of players over its nine seasons in MLS but the one player who is quickly becoming the face of the club is Michael Bradley. He has been instrumental in the recruitment of new players and this current look TFC side is very much being built around this 27-year-old U.S. international.

DID YOU KNOW?

Toronto FC features the most number of academy graduates out of any club in MLS and the club continued to invest in its young stars with the introduction of Toronto FC II, a USL PRO franchise that gives TFC Academy players a direct route to the top in a competitive environment. TFC II will play its games in the City of Vaughan.



Founded: 2006
Stadium: BMO Field, Toronto, ON
MLS Titles: 0
Best Finish: 11th Overall - 2010



MLS EAST: TORONTO FC



TORONTO FC

Nickname: The Reds // Ultras: Red Patch Boys, U-Sector



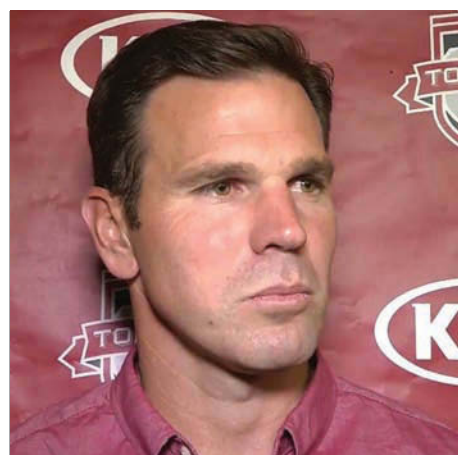
THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

There's one big goal in mind for Toronto FC in 2015: make the playoffs. In the club's ninth year in Major League Soccer, a playoff spot remains an elusive prize but one that this Canadian outfit is investing heavily into pursuing, with one eye on the MLS Cup as well. Toronto FC made a number of huge signings this offseason, replacing Jermain Defoe who wished for a return to the Premier League. In 2015, Toronto FC will feature a new look but with a healthy core of players now established at the team, this is, perhaps, the strongest team Toronto FC has ever fielded in MLS.



ONE TO WATCH: JOZY ALTIDORE

Toronto FC also picked up a new striker, 25-year-old U.S. international Jozy Altidore, in a straight swap for Defoe with Premier League side Sunderland. Altidore has struggled in England but is a proven MLS goal scorer and will look to reinvigorate his career with the ambitious project underway at Toronto.



THE COACH: GREG VANNEY

Greg Vanney enters his first full season as the head coach of Toronto FC after taking over from Ryan Nelsen midway through 2014, and he has already put his stamp on the team, implementing a new formation, with new players in key positions across the field. Vanney could be a coach to watch for in 2015.

"WHEN WE SET OFF IN THE OFFSEASON, WE WANTED TO GET COMPLIMENTARY PIECES. OUR THREE BEST PLAYERS, OUR THREE DESIGNATED PLAYERS, HAVE TO BE ABLE TO PLAY TOGETHER. THEY HAVE TO COMPLIMENT EACH OTHER."

- Greg Vanney on two new Designated Players in 2015.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: Feb. 3rd vs. Montverde Academy (Orlando, FL)

Final Pre-Season Game: Feb. 28th vs. TBD (Bradenton, FL)

Season Opener: Mar. 7th @ Vancouver Whitecaps

Home Opener: May 5th vs. Houston Dynamo

Final Game: Oct. 25th @ Montreal Impact



STAR MAN: SEBASTIAN GIOVINCO

There's a new star in Toronto after the club parted ways with Jermain Defoe, and he might just be the biggest signing in Major League Soccer's history: Italian international Sebastian Giovinco joined Toronto FC at the prime of his career, at only 28 years old, and gives TFC unparalleled class and quality in midfield.



ALL FOR ONE

2015 SEASON SCHEDULE

TORONTOFC.CA

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THE 2015 SEASON



MARCH

SAT 7	VANCOUVER	AWAY	6:00
SAT 14	COLUMBUS	AWAY	7:30
SUN 29	REAL SALT LAKE	AWAY	7:00

APRIL

SAT 4	CHICAGO	AWAY	3:00
SAT 18	FC DALLAS	AWAY	8:30
SUN 26	ORLANDO CITY SC	AWAY	7:00

MAY

SAT 2	PHILADELPHIA	AWAY	4:00
SUN 10	HOUSTON	HOME	5:00
WED 13	MONTREAL	AMWAY CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP HOME	8:00
SAT 16	NEW ENGLAND	AWAY	7:30
SAT 23	PORTLAND	HOME	5:00
SAT 30	SAN JOSE	HOME	5:00

JUNE

SAT 6	D.C. UNITED	AWAY	7:00
SAT 20	NEW YORK CITY FC	HOME	7:00
WED 24	MONTREAL	HOME	8:00
SAT 27	D.C. UNITED	HOME	5:00

JULY

<i>SAT 4</i>	<i>LA GALAXY</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>10:30</i>
<i>SUN 12</i>	<i>NEW YORK CITY FC</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>5:00</i>
<i>SAT 18</i>	<i>PHILADELPHIA</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>4:00</i>
<i>SAT 25</i>	<i>COLUMBUS</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>7:30</i>

AUGUST

<i>SAT 1</i>	<i>NEW ENGLAND</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>7:30</i>
<i>WED 5</i>	<i>ORLANDO CITY SC</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>8:00</i>
<i>SAT 8</i>	<i>SPORTING KC</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>4:00</i>
<i>SAT 15</i>	<i>NEW YORK RED BULLS</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>7:00</i>
<i>SAT 22</i>	<i>ORLANDO CITY SC</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>4:00</i>
<i>SAT 29</i>	<i>MONTREAL</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>4:00</i>

SEPTEMBER

<i>SAT 5</i>	<i>SEATTLE</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>10:00</i>
<i>SUN 13</i>	<i>NEW ENGLAND</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>5:00</i>
<i>WED 16</i>	<i>NEW YORK CITY FC</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>7:00</i>
<i>SAT 19</i>	<i>COLORADO</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>2:00</i>
<i>SAT 26</i>	<i>CHICAGO</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>2:00</i>

OCTOBER

<i>SAT 3</i>	<i>PHILADELPHIA</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>5:00</i>
<i>WED 14</i>	<i>NEW YORK RED BULLS</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>7:00</i>
<i>SAT 17</i>	<i>COLUMBUS</i>	<i>HOME</i>	<i>2:00</i>
<i>SUN 25</i>	<i>MONTREAL</i>	<i>AWAY</i>	<i>5:00</i>



MLS 2015 FIXTURES

● Home ● Away



							
MARCH	3/6 9:00PM CST Vs. Los Angeles 3/14 5:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver 3/22 6:00PM CDT Vs. San Jose 3/29 4:00PM CDT Vs. Philadelphia	3/7 2:00PM MST Vs. Philadelphia 3/21 2:00PM MDT Vs. NYCFC 3/28 6:30PM MDT Vs. Houston	3/7 8:30PM EST Vs. Houston 3/14 7:30PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 3/28 7:30PM EDT Vs. New York	3/7 3:00PM EST Vs. Montreal 3/22 5:00PM EDT Vs. New York 3/28 7:00PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles	3/7 7:30PM CST Vs. San Jose 3/14 7:30PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC 3/20 6:00PM CDT Vs. Philadelphia 3/28 7:30PM CDT Vs. Seattle	3/7 7:30PM CST Vs. Columbus 3/13 6:00PM CDT Vs. Orlando City 3/21 9:30PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles 3/28 7:30PM CDT Vs. Colorado	3/6 7:00PM PST Vs. Chicago 3/15 4:00PM PDT Vs. Portland 3/21 7:30PM PDT Vs. Houston 3/28 4:00PM PDT Vs. D.C. United
APRIL	4/4 2:00PM CDT Vs. Toronto FC 4/15 6:30PM CDT Vs. New England 4/18 2:00PM CDT Vs. Montreal 4/24 7:00PM CDT Vs. New York City FC	4/4 5:00PM MDT Vs. New England 4/10 5:00PM MDT Vs. FC Dallas 4/18 7:00PM MDT Vs. Seattle 4/24 8:00PM MDT Vs. FC Dallas	4/8 10:00PM EDT Vs. Vancouver 4/11 3:00PM EDT Vs. New England 4/18 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 4/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	4/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 4/11 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 4/18 7:00PM EDT Vs. Houston 4/25 TBD Vs. Vancouver	4/4 9:30PM CDT Vs. Portland 4/10 6:00PM CDT Vs. Colorado 4/18 7:30PM CDT Vs. Toronto FC 4/24 9:00PM CDT Vs. Colorado	4/4 TBD Vs. Seattle 4/11 7:30PM CDT Vs. Montreal 4/18 6:00PM CDT Vs. D.C. United 4/25 7:30PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC	4/4 7:00PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 4/12 4:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 4/18 7:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 4/26 2:00PM PDT Vs. New York
MAY	5/3 4:00PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC 5/9 2:00PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/15 6:00PM CDT Vs. New York City FC 5/22 7:00PM CDT Vs. Columbus 5/30 7:30PM CDT Vs. Montreal	5/2 8:30PM MDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/8 8:00PM MDT Vs. San Jose 5/16 6:30PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC 5/23 7:00PM MDT Vs. Vancouver 5/27 8:00PM MDT Vs. Seattle 5/30 7:00PM MDT Vs. Portland	5/2 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 5/9 7:30PM EDT Vs. Seattle 5/16 10:30PM EDT Vs. San Jose 5/22 8:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 5/30 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	5/2 7:00PM EDT Vs. Crew SC 5/9 7:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 5/13 8:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 5/17 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 5/23 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 5/27 10:30PM EDT Vs. Portland 5/30 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	5/1 7:00PM CDT Vs. Houston 5/9 7:30PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/15 8:00PM CDT Vs. New York 5/23 TBD Vs. Montreal 5/29 8:00PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC	5/1 8:00PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas 5/5 7:30PM CDT Vs. San Jose 5/10 4:00PM CDT Vs. Toronto FC 5/16 7:30PM CDT Vs. Portland 5/22 9:30PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/30 6:00PM CDT Vs. New York	5/2 7:30PM PDT Vs. Colorado 5/6 6:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/9 5:30PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 5/17 2:00PM PDT Vs. Orlando City 5/22 7:30PM PDT Vs. Houston 5/27 7:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/31 4:00PM PDT Vs. New England
JUNE	6/3 6:00PM CDT Vs. D.C. United 6/6 7:30PM CDT Vs. Orlando 6/24 7:30PM CDT Vs. D.C. United	6/7 3:00PM MDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 6/19 7:00PM MDT Vs. FC Dallas 6/24 5:30PM MDT Vs. Orlando City 6/27 6:30PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC	6/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 6/6 7:30PM EDT Vs. Montreal 6/13 7:30PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 6/24 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 6/27 10:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake	6/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 6/6 7:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 6/14 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 6/21 5:00PM EDT Vs. New England 6/24 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 6/27 TBD Vs. Toronto FC	6/7 6:00PM CDT Vs. San Jose 6/13 TBD Vs. Seattle 6/19 8:00PM CDT Vs. Colorado 6/26 8:00PM CDT Vs. Houston	6/5 8:00PM CDT Vs. New York 6/20 9:30PM CDT Vs. Portland 6/26 8:00PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas	6/6 7:30PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 6/13 4:30PM PDT Vs. Columbus 6/20 7:30PM PDT Vs. Philadelphia 6/24 8:00PM PDT Vs. Portland 6/27 7:30PM PDT Vs. San Jose
JULY	7/3 8:00PM CDT Vs. Houston 7/11 7:30PM CDT Vs. Seattle 7/15 7:30PM CDT Vs. Columbus 7/19 4:00PM CDT Vs. Columbus 7/25 7:30PM CDT Vs. New England	7/4 7:00PM MDT Vs. Vancouver 7/12 5:00PM MDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 7/18 8:00PM MDT Vs. Seattle 7/18 8:00PM MDT Vs. New York	7/4 7:30PM EDT Vs. New York 7/11 8:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 7/15 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 7/19 5:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 7/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC	7/3 11:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle 7/18 9:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 7/26 5:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	7/4 8:00PM CDT Vs. New England 7/11 6:30PM CDT Vs. Orlando City 7/18 8:00PM CDT Vs. D.C. United 7/25 8:00PM CDT Vs. Portland	7/3 8:00PM CDT Vs. Chicago 7/10 10:00PM CDT Vs. San Jose 7/18 9:00PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 7/25 8:00PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles	7/4 7:30PM PDT Vs. Toronto FC 7/17 8:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose 7/25 6:00PM PDT Vs. Houston
AUGUST	8/2 6:00PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas 8/7 10:00PM CDT Vs. Portland 8/16 6:00PM CDT Vs. Philadelphia 8/22 7:30PM CDT Vs. Chicago 8/26 7:30PM CDT Vs. New York 8/29 6:30PM CDT Vs. Orlando	8/1 7:00PM MDT Vs. Los Angeles 8/8 7:00PM MDT Vs. Columbus 8/14 9:00PM MDT Vs. San Jose 8/22 6:30PM MDT Vs. Chicago 8/26 7:00PM MDT Vs. Houston 8/29 7:00PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC	8/1 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 8/8 9:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 8/19 7:30PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 8/22 7:30PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 8/29 4:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC	8/1 7:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 8/8 TBD Vs. Montreal 8/13 7:30PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 8/22 7:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose 8/30 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York	8/2 6:00PM CDT Vs. Chicago 8/15 8:00PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles 8/22 TBD Vs. Vancouver 8/29 8:00PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake	8/1 7:30PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC 8/8 8:00PM CDT Vs. San Jose 8/15 6:30PM CDT Vs. New England 8/21 10:00PM CDT Vs. Portland 8/26 8:00PM CDT Vs. Colorado 8/29 8:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver	8/1 6:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 8/9 1:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 8/15 6:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 8/23 2:00PM PDT Vs. New York 8/28 8:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose
SEPT	9/5 7:00PM CDT Vs. Montreal 9/11 6:00PM CDT Vs. New York 9/19 7:30PM CDT Vs. Orlando 9/26 1:00PM CDT Vs. Toronto FC	9/9 8:00PM MDT Vs. Vancouver 9/12 7:00PM MDT Vs. D.C. United 9/19 12:00PM MDT Vs. Toronto FC 9/26 6:30PM MDT Vs. Houston	9/6 7:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 9/12 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 9/19 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 9/26 7:30PM EDT Vs. Portland	9/12 9:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 9/19 7:00PM EDT Vs. Crew SC 9/26 TBD Vs. Montreal	9/6 6:00PM CDT Vs. Columbus 9/12 7:30PM CDT Vs. New York City 9/18 6:00PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC 9/26 9:30PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles	9/12 7:30PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 9/20 6:00PM CDT Vs. Philadelphia 9/23 7:30PM CDT Vs. Sporting KC 9/26 7:30PM CDT Vs. Colorado	9/12 7:30PM PDT Vs. Montreal 9/19 6:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 9/26 7:30PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas
OCT	10/3 7:30PM CDT Vs. New England 10/18 TBD Vs. D.C. United 10/25 TBD Vs. New York	10/3 7:00PM MDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 10/10 7:00PM MDT Vs. Montreal 10/25 5:00PM MDT Vs. Portland	10/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 10/17 2:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	10/2 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 10/18 TBD Vs. Chicago 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. Crew SC	10/4 4:00PM CDT Vs. Houston 10/7 TBD Vs. Vancouver 10/14 8:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver 10/17 8:30PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 10/25 TBD Vs. San Jose	10/4 4:00PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas 10/18 TBD Vs. Seattle 10/25 6:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver	10/4 6:30PM PDT Vs. Seattle 10/18 4:00PM PDT Vs. Portland 10/25 4:00PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC



● Home ● Away



							
MARCH	3/7 3:00PM EST Vs. D.C. United 3/21 3:00PM EDT Vs. New England 3/28 4:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	3/8 9:30PM EDT Vs. Seattle 3/15 5:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 3/21 3:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 3/28 3:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose	3/8 5:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 3/15 5:00PM EDT Vs. New England 3/21 4:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 3/28 7:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC	3/8 7:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 3/22 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 3/28 TBD Vs. Columbus	3/8 5:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 3/13 7:00PM EDT Vs. Houston 3/21 7:30PM EDT Vs. Vancouver 3/28 TBD Vs. Montreal	3/7 4:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 3/14 9:30PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 3/20 7:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 3/29 5:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago	3/7 7:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 3/15 4:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 3/21 5:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 3/28 TBD Vs. Vancouver
APRIL	4/4 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 4/11 8:30PM EDT Vs. Houston 4/18 3:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 4/25 10:30PM EDT Vs. San Jose	4/4 7:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 4/11 3:00PM EDT Vs. Columbus 4/15 7:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 4/19 5:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 4/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake	4/11 4:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 4/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 4/19 7:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 4/24 8:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago	4/4 7:30PM EDT Vs. Montreal 4/11 TBD Vs. D.C. United 4/17 7:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose 4/26 5:00PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles	4/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 4/12 5:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 4/18 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 4/26 7:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC	4/5 7:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 4/11 4:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 4/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 4/19 5:00PM EDT Vs. New England 4/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus	4/4 7:30PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 4/12 2:00PM PDT Vs. Orlando City 4/19 4:00PM PDT Vs. NYCFC 4/26 6:30PM PDT Vs. Seattle
MAY	5/6 8:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 5/9 4:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 5/13 8:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 5/16 4:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/23 8:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 5/30 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago	5/2 7:30PM EDT Vs. New York 5/8 8:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 5/16 7:30PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 5/20 8:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 5/23 7:30PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 5/31 7:00PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles	5/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle 5/10 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 5/15 7:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 5/23 10:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/30 7:00PM EDT Vs. Houston	5/2 TBD Vs. New England 5/10 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 5/15 9:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 5/24 5:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 5/31 5:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle	5/8 8:00PM EDT Vs. New England 5/13 8:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 5/17 5:00PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/24 7:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose 5/30 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus	5/2 4:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 5/9 TBD Vs. Vancouver 5/17 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 5/24 5:00PM EDT Vs. New York 5/30 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	5/2 7:30PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 5/9 TBD Vs. Montreal 5/16 5:30PM PDT Vs. Houston 5/23 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 5/27 7:30PM PDT Vs. D.C. United 5/30 6:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado
JUNE	6/3 8:00PM EDT Vs. Vancouver 6/6 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 6/13 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 6/20 8:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 6/24 8:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 6/27 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	6/6 10:30PM EDT Vs. Portland 6/21 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 6/24 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 6/27 7:30PM EDT Vs. Vancouver	6/6 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 6/13 7:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 6/20 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 6/28 5:00PM EDT Vs. New York	6/5 9:00PM EDT Vs. Houston 6/20 7:00PM EDT Vs. Vancouver 6/24 7:30PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 6/28 5:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC	6/6 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 6/14 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 6/20 TBD Vs. Montreal 6/24 7:30PM EDT Vs. Colorado	6/3 7:00PM EDT Vs. Columbus 6/6 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 6/20 10:30PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 6/24 7:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle 6/27 7:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal	6/6 7:30PM PDT Vs. New England 6/20 7:30PM PDT Vs. Houston 6/24 8:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 6/28 4:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle
JULY	7/4 8:00PM EDT Vs. New York 7/11 8:00PM EDT Vs. Columbus 7/18 8:30PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 7/25 8:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle	7/4 9:00PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 7/11 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 7/18 7:30PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 7/25 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago	7/4 TBD Vs. Montreal 7/12 5:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 7/18 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 7/26 2:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	7/4 TBD Vs. Columbus 7/11 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 7/19 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 7/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Colorado	7/4 10:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 7/11 7:30PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 7/19 TBD Vs. New York 7/26 2:30PM EDT Vs. NYCFC	7/11 7:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 7/18 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 7/26 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	7/5 2:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose 7/11 4:00PM PDT Vs. Philadelphia 7/18 7:30PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 7/25 6:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas
AUGUST	8/1 2:00PM EDT Vs. New York City 8/5 8:00PM EDT Vs. New York 8/8 8:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 8/22 8:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 8/29 4:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC	8/1 7:30PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 8/15 7:30PM EDT Vs. Houston 8/29 7:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	8/1 2:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 8/9 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 8/13 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 8/19 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 8/23 5:00PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 8/29 4:00PM EDT Vs. Columbus	8/1 TBD Vs. Philadelphia 8/5 TBD Vs. Montreal 8/9 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 8/15 7:30PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 8/26 TBD Vs. Chicago 8/30 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	8/1 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 8/5 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 8/8 7:30PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 8/16 5:00PM EDT Vs. Seattle 8/22 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 8/29 7:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago	8/1 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 8/8 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 8/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 8/22 8:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 8/29 7:00PM EDT Vs. New England	8/2 2:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose 8/7 8:00PM PDT Vs. Chicago 8/15 7:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 8/21 8:00PM PDT Vs. Houston 8/30 2:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle
SEPT	9/5 8:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 9/12 10:30PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 9/19 8:00PM EDT Vs. New England 9/26 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	9/5 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 9/13 5:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 9/16 7:30PM EDT Vs. New York 9/19 8:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 9/26 7:30PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia	9/12 8:30PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 9/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC 9/19 7:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose 9/26 TBD Vs. Vancouver	9/11 7:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 9/16 TBD Vs. New England 9/20 5:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 9/25 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	9/5 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 9/13 7:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 9/19 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 9/25 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York	9/5 10:30PM EDT Vs. San Jose 9/12 7:00PM EDT Vs. Columbus 9/20 7:00PM EDT Vs. Houston 9/26 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England	9/9 7:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 9/20 2:00PM PDT Vs. New York 9/26 4:30PM PDT Vs. Columbus
OCT	10/3 7:30PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 10/10 9:00PM EDT Vs. Colorado 10/17 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. Toronto FC	10/3 8:30PM EDT Vs. Chicago 10/17 7:30PM EDT Vs. Montreal 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC	10/2 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 10/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. New England	10/3 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 10/14 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 10/18 TBD Vs. Philadelphia 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago	10/3 7:30PM EDT Vs. Montreal 10/16 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 10/25 TBD Vs. Philadelphia	10/3 TBD Vs. Toronto FC 10/18 TBD Vs. New York 10/25 5:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	10/3 7:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 10/14 6:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 10/18 TBD Vs. Los Angeles 10/25 4:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado



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MARCH	3/7 8:30PM MST Vs. Portland 3/14 7:30PM MDT Vs. Philadelphia 3/29 5:00PM MDT Vs. Toronto FC	3/7 5:30PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 3/14 7:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 3/22 4:00PM PDT Vs. Chicago 3/28 12:00PM PDT Vs. New England	3/8 6:30PM PDT Vs. New England 3/14 7:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose 3/24 7:00PM PDT Vs. Club Tijuana 3/28 7:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas	3/8 6:00PM CDT Vs. New York 3/14 7:30PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas 3/21 7:30PM CDT Vs. Portland 3/28 6:00PM CDT Vs. NYCFC	3/7 6:00PM EST Vs. Vancouver 3/14 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus 3/29 7:00PM EDT Vs. Real Salt Lake	3/7 3:00PM PST Vs. Toronto FC 3/14 3:00PM PDT Vs. Chicago 3/21 4:30PM PDT Vs. Orlando City 3/28 5:00PM PDT Vs. Portland
APRIL	4/5 3:00PM MDT Vs. San Jose 4/11 6:30PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC 4/18 7:30PM MDT Vs. Vancouver 4/25 5:30PM MDT Vs. New England	4/5 2:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 4/11 7:30PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 4/17 4:00PM PDT Vs. New York 4/25 7:30PM PDT Vs. Montreal	4/4 7:00PM PDT Vs. Houston 4/12 4:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 4/18 6:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 4/26 6:30PM PDT Vs. Portland	4/5 6:00PM CDT Vs. Philadelphia 4/11 7:30PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 4/18 9:30PM CDT Vs. Los Angeles 4/25 7:30PM CDT Vs. Houston	4/4 3:00PM EDT Vs. Chicago 4/18 8:30PM EDT Vs. FC Dallas 4/26 7:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City	4/4 7:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 4/8 7:00PM PDT Vs. Columbus 4/11 7:30PM PDT Vs. San Jose 4/18 6:30PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 4/25 7:30PM PDT Vs. D.C. United
MAY	5/1 8:00PM MDT Vs. San Jose 5/6 7:30PM MDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/9 1:00PM MDT Vs. Chicago 5/16 TBD Vs. Montreal 5/23 8:00PM MDT Vs. NYCFC 5/27 8:30PM MDT Vs. Los Angeles 5/30 TBD Vs. Vancouver	5/1 7:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 5/5 5:30PM PDT Vs. Houston 5/8 7:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 5/16 7:30PM PDT Vs. Columbus 5/24 4:00PM PDT Vs. Columbus 5/30 2:00PM PDT Vs. Toronto FC	5/3 4:00PM PDT Vs. NYCFC 5/9 4:30PM PDT Vs. Columbus 5/16 4:00PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 5/23 7:00PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 5/27 7:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 5/31 2:00PM PDT Vs. New York	5/3 4:00PM CDT Vs. Chicago 5/9 6:00PM CDT Vs. D.C. United 5/16 7:30PM CDT Vs. Colorado 5/20 7:00PM CDT Vs. New England 5/23 9:00PM CDT Vs. Seattle 5/29 8:00PM CDT Vs. FC Dallas	5/2 4:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 5/6 TBD Vs. Montreal 5/10 5:00PM EDT Vs. Houston 5/13 8:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 5/16 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 5/23 5:00PM EDT Vs. Portland 5/30 5:00PM EDT Vs. San Jose	5/2 7:30PM PDT Vs. Portland 5/6 TBD Vs. ED. or OT. 5/9 4:00PM PDT Vs. Philadelphia 5/13 TBD Vs. ED. or OT. 5/16 4:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 5/23 6:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 5/30 3:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake
JUNE	6/7 3:00PM MDT Vs. Colorado 6/21 8:00PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC 6/24 5:30PM MDT Vs. New York 6/27 8:00PM MDT Vs. Columbus	6/7 4:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 6/20 4:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 6/27 7:30PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles	6/6 5:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 6/13 7:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 6/20 1:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose 6/24 4:00PM PDT Vs. Philadelphia 6/28 4:00PM PDT Vs. Portland	6/6 7:30PM CDT Vs. Seattle 6/21 9:00PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 6/27 7:30PM CDT Vs. Colorado	6/6 7:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United 6/20 7:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 6/24 8:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal 6/27 5:00PM EDT Vs. D.C. United	6/3 5:00PM PDT Vs. Montreal 6/6 7:30PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 6/20 4:00PM PDT Vs. New York 6/27 4:30PM PDT Vs. New England
JULY	7/4 8:00PM MDT Vs. Orlando City 7/12 5:00PM MDT Vs. Colorado 7/18 8:00PM MDT Vs. Houston 7/24 9:00PM MDT Vs. Sporting KC	7/5 2:00PM PDT Vs. Portland 7/10 8:00PM PDT Vs. Houston 7/17 8:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 7/26 4:00PM PDT Vs. Vancouver	7/3 8:00PM PDT Vs. D.C. United 7/11 6:30PM PDT Vs. Chicago 7/18 7:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 7/25 5:00PM PDT Vs. Montreal	7/12 8:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver 7/18 7:30PM CDT Vs. Montreal 7/24 10:00PM CDT Vs. Real Salt Lake	7/4 10:30PM EDT Vs. Los Angeles 7/12 5:00PM EDT Vs. NYCFC 7/18 4:00PM EDT Vs. Philadelphia 7/25 7:30PM EDT Vs. Columbus	7/4 6:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 7/12 6:00PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 7/18 7:30PM PDT Vs. Portland 7/26 4:00PM PDT Vs. San Jose
AUGUST	8/1 5:00PM MDT Vs. D.C. United 8/8 TBD Vs. Vancouver 8/15 8:00PM MDT Vs. Portland 8/22 8:00PM MDT Vs. Seattle 8/29 7:00PM MDT Vs. FC Dallas	8/2 2:00PM PDT Vs. Portland 8/8 6:00PM PDT Vs. Houston 8/14 8:00PM PDT Vs. Colorado 8/19 5:30PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 8/22 4:00PM PDT Vs. D.C. United 8/28 8:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles	8/1 7:00PM PDT Vs. Vancouver 8/9 1:00PM PDT Vs. Los Angeles 8/16 2:00PM PDT Vs. Orlando City 8/22 7:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 8/30 2:00PM PDT Vs. Portland	8/1 7:30PM CDT Vs. Houston 8/8 3:00PM CDT Vs. Toronto FC 8/15 8:00PM CDT Vs. Vancouver 8/19 7:30PM CDT Vs. San Jose 8/22 6:30PM CDT Vs. Columbus 8/29 8:00PM CDT Vs. Colorado	8/1 7:30PM EDT Vs. New England 8/5 8:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 8/8 4:00PM EDT Vs. Sporting KC 8/15 7:00PM EDT Vs. New York 8/22 4:00PM EDT Vs. Orlando City 8/29 4:00PM EDT Vs. Montreal	8/1 7:00PM PDT Vs. Seattle 8/8 7:00PM PDT Vs. Real Salt Lake 8/15 6:00PM PDT Vs. Sporting KC 8/22 7:00PM PDT Vs. FC Dallas 8/29 6:00PM PDT Vs. Houston
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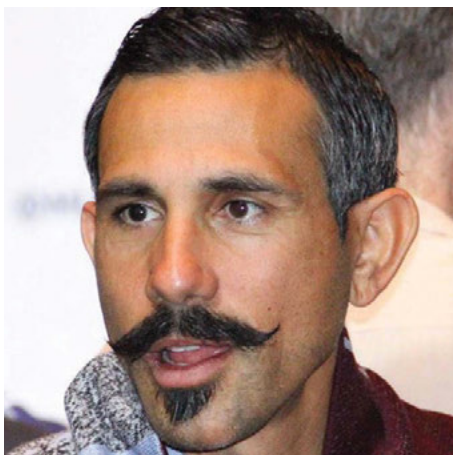
MLS WEST: **COLORADO RAPIDS**

COLORADORAPIDS

Nicknames: Rapids // Ultras: Centennial 38



Founded: 1996
Stadium: Dick's Sporting Goods Park
MLS Titles: 1
Best Season Finish: 3rd - 1998, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005



THE COACH: PABLO MASTROENI

Colorado Rapids head coach Pablo Mastroeni made quite a splash during the offseason, rocking an impressive moustache during the 2015 MLS SuperDraft. Mastroeni, a former Rapids player, took over as head coach and he is a players' coach through and through. He'll look to bring some stability to Colorado.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Five years ago the Colorado Rapids were champions of the league. Five years on, the club is struggling in the standings, struggling in attendance and looking for a bit of a miracle. The team that won the championship is now long gone, disbanded and traded away. Only a few players remain from those days and with not a lot of firepower to work with, the Rapids are set to endure a difficult challenge in the Western Conference. Something truly special needs to happen up on the mountains of Denver if the Rapids are to make playoffs.



ONE TO WATCH: DESHORN BROWN

Jamaican international forward Deshorn Brown already has a few years under his belt and, at 24, has proven himself to be a capable goalscorer in this league. He's netted 20 goals in 61 league matches since 2013 and 2015 could be the year he finds his feet at last. He's certainly one to watch out for.

"MY DAD SAID, 'SON YOU GOTTA CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK AND A GOOD WAY TO DO THAT MIGHT BE CHANGING THE WAY YOU LOOK. WHY DON'T YOU GO WEAR A BOWTIE AND START WEARING A MOUSTACHE SO THAT WHEN YOU LOOK IN A MIRROR YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE A COACH AND THAT YOU ARE NO LONGER A PLAYER?'"

- Pablo Mastroeni on his new look.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/15 vs San Jose
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 vs TBD
Season Opener: 3/7 at Philadelphia
Home Opener: 3/21 vs NYCFC
Final Game: 10/25 at Portland

BY THE NUMBERS

COLORADO RAPIDS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 8th

League: 17th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

West: 5th

League: 9th

Playoffs: KNOCKOUT ROUND

2012

West: 7th

League: 14th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: 5th

League: 6th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2010

West: 5th

League: 7th

Playoffs: WON

All-Time Leading Scorer: Conor Casey (50)

All-Time Record: 594-224-255

MLS Playoff Appearances: 12

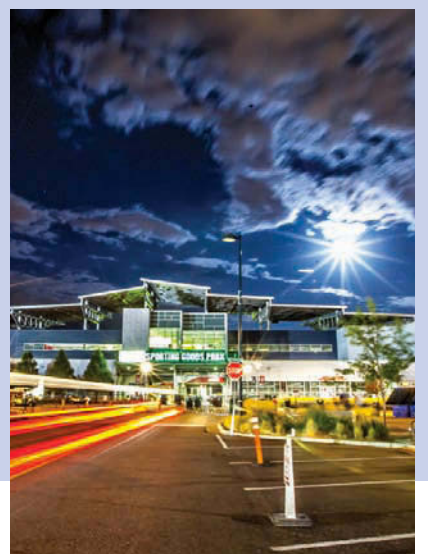


CLUB LEGEND: PABLO MASTROENI

In 2010, the Colorado Rapids pulled off the seemingly impossible, defeating FC Dallas in the playoff finals to hoist the MLS Cup. It's been a long time since then, but to this day, Rapids fans celebrate their captain, Pablo Mastroeni, for a historic achievement. Mastroeni, now the club's head coach, remains a fan favourite.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Rapids play in Denver at Dick's Sporting Goods Park and, due to the altitude, hold the unofficial record for most difficult away venue. MLS will be hoping to use that altitude to their advantage as Colorado is hosting the 2015 MLS All Star game, though no opponent has been announced just yet.



STAR MAN: GABRIEL TORRES

Panamanian international forward Gabriel Torres is the club's first and only Designated Player and the player around whom the Rapids have built their roster. Torres is a tricky customer and a threat in and around the box, and while he doesn't offer the height or presence of Conor Casey, he is still quite a handful.

BY THE NUMBERS

F.C. DALLAS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 4th

League: 6th

Playoffs: SEMIFINAL

2013

West: 8th

League: 15th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

West: 6th

League: 13th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: 4th

League: 4th

Playoffs: WILDCARD

2010

West: 3rd

League: 5th

Playoffs: LOST MLS CUP

All-Time Leading Scorer: Jason Kreis (91)

All-Time Record: 243-237-113

MLS Playoff Appearances: 17



CLUB LEGEND: JASON KREIS

With almost 250 league appearances, F.C. Dallas' club legend is now more closely associated with Real Salt Lake and New York City FC, but in the early years of MLS, Jason Kreis was a Dallas man through and through. His 91 goals made him well loved but it was his tenacity and attacking acumen that made him an icon.

DID YOU KNOW?

While FC Dallas is today known for the horned bull on its club logo, that wasn't always their animal of choice; prior to the team's name change from the Dallas Burn to FC Dallas, the club logo featured a black bucking bronco, breathing fire. Who would win in a fight, we wonder?



Founded: 1996
Stadium: Toyota Stadium
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2006



Nickname: The Hoops, Red Stripes // **Ultras:** North End United for FC Dallas

MLS WEST: F.C. DALLAS



F.C. DALLAS



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

There are a number of questions for FC Dallas to answer in 2015: will youth finally triumph over experience? Dallas has the most homegrown player signings and the club features once of the youngest squads in the league. Can the team function in midfield with so many creative types? The addition of Canadian international Kyle Bekker to an already loaded midfield makes for an interesting, albeit slightly weaker core. Ultimately, is FC Dallas ready to break out this season? The team plays in far too reserved a style unbecoming of its players, who yearn for flair and have a fire within them.



ONE TO WATCH: TESHU AKINDELE

Both U.S. and Canadian football fans will be keeping a close eye on Tesho Akindele, as this promising young forward has yet to decide his international future. Akindele scored plenty of goals as a rookie last season and was named the Rookie of the Year in 2014 with no signs of a sophomore slump coming up, either.



THE COACH: OSCAR PAREJA

Head coach Oscar Pareja is no stranger to FC Dallas, having played with the Hoops from 1998-2005. Pareja was the head coach of the Colorado Rapids before making the switch to Dallas and he takes over a team that has plenty of promising players. Pareja will need to find the right balance to find success this year.



STAR MEN: DAVID TEXEIRA (R) & MAURO DIAZ (L)

There's a pair of South American Designated Players at FC Dallas, both of whom have come into the side and established themselves as core pieces in the team's starting XI: Uruguayan forward David Texeira and Argentine midfielder Mauro Diaz form this dynamic duo for the Hoops, one that could be lethal in 2015.

"I WAS EXCITED THE SECOND I HEARD THE NEWS. OBVIOUSLY, FOR THE FIRST TIME BEING TRADED THE SECOND YOU HEAR IT, IT'S A SHOCK BUT ONCE I GOT A CALL FROM OSCAR, IT WAS LIKE GET ME TO DALLAS, LET'S DO THIS. FROM THAT PHONE CALL ON, IT'S JUST BEEN GREAT."

- Kyle Bekker, new FC Dallas signing.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/4 at Orlando
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 at San Antonio
Season Opener: 3/7 vs San Jose
Home Opener: 3/7 vs San Jose
Final Game: 10/25 at FC Dallas



MLS WEST: HOUSTON DYNAMO

HOUSTON DYNAMO



Founded: 2006
Stadium: BBVA Compass Stadium
MLS Titles: 2
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2008

Nicknames: Orange Crush // **Ultras:** Texian Army, La Bateria, Brickwall Firm, El Batallón.



THE COACH: OWEN COYLE

A major part of the Houston rebuild came when the club fired its long-time head coach, Domenic Kinnear, and hired, in his stead, Premier League manager Owen Coyle, who was the gaffer at Wigan Athletic, Bolton Wanderers and Burnley. Coyle's experience at the top level makes him a perfect fit at Houston.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

2015 is a new start for the Houston Dynamo, a franchise that has historically been a powerhouse team in MLS that has struggled a bit in the last few years. The Dynamo is in need of a rejuvenation and a move to the Western Conference might just do this team some justice despite some harder competition. If you subscribe to the theory that iron sharpens iron, then a tougher environment could allow this young Dynamo team to cut its teeth a bit, too. Ultimately, the Dynamo look set to finish middle of the table but have the potential to finish higher.



ONE TO WATCH: WILL BRUIN

2015 could be a breakout year for Houston Dynamo striker Will Bruin who has been fairly consistent in the league since being drafted in 2011. Bruin is a double-digit goal scorer but this could be the year he takes things to the next level, due, in part, to an influx of new attacking midfielders in support behind him.

"LOOKING FORWARD, WE'RE BUILDING A TEAM THAT CAN STAND TOE-TO-TOE WITH THE BEST. WHAT WE WANT TO DO IS GIVE OURSELVES A FIGHTING CHANCE. WITH THE TYPE OF PLAYERS WE'RE BRINGING IN AND ADDING TO THE SQUAD, WE'VE CERTAINLY GOT A CHANCE TO DO THAT."

- Owen Coyle on Houston's 2015 season hopes.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: N/A
Final Pre-Season Game: N/A
Season Opener: 3/7 vs Columbus Crew
Home Opener: 3/7 vs Columbus Crew
Final Game: 10/25 at Vancouver Whitecaps

BY THE NUMBERS

HOUSTON DYNAMO LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 8th
League: 14th
Playoffs: DNQ

2013

East: 4th
League: 10th
Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2012

East: 5th
League: 9th
Playoffs: LOST MLS CUP

2011

East: 2nd
League: 7th
Playoffs: LOST MLS CUP

2010

West: 7th
League: 12th
Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer: Brian Ching (56)

All-Time Record: 100-90-74

MLS Playoff Appearances: 7



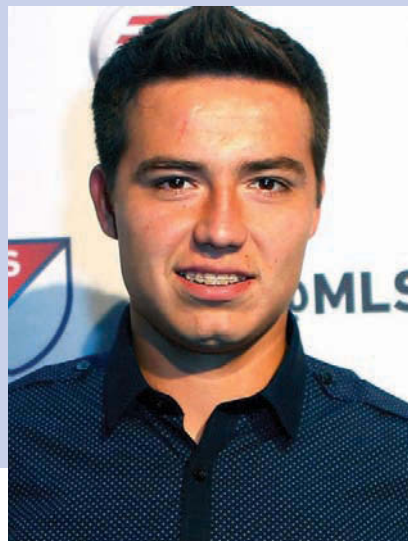
CLUB LEGEND:

DWAYNE DE ROSARIO

One of Major League Soccer's finest stars is a Houston Dynamo favourite as well. Canadian international Dwayne De Rosario holds a special place in Houston and for good reason: he won MLS Cup titles, MLS MVP awards and everything in between during his time in an orange shirt!

DID YOU KNOW?

In July, the Houston Dynamo will take one last bite out of the now-dead Chivas USA franchise, picking up the Goats' best player, Erick "Cubo" Torres, who is now on loan at Chivas Guadalajara in Mexico. This Mexican international isn't just a Designated Player, but a game changer, too, and will give Houston a huge boost in 2015.



STAR MAN: BRAD DAVIS

Captain Brad Davis is the star man at the Houston Dynamo and this left midfielder's stock rose exponentially last season when he made it to the final U.S. roster for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. His accurate crossing and goal scoring touch makes him an important figure for Houston's midfield, too.

BY THE NUMBERS

LOS ANGELES GALAXY LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 2nd

League: 2nd

Playoffs: WON

2013

West: 3rd

League: 5th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2012

West: 4th

League: 8th

Playoffs: WON

2011

West: 1st

League: 1st

Playoffs: WON

2010

West: 1st

League: 1st

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer:

Landon Donovan (112)

All-Time Record: 281-199-113

MLS Playoff Appearances: 16



CLUB LEGEND: LANDON DONOVAN

While David Beckham was the club's marquee man, U.S. international Landon Donovan will go down in history at the club legend in Los Angeles. Such was Donovan's influence to the growth of MLS that the MLS MVP award was renamed to the Landon Donovan MLS MVP award, a huge honor for this iconic American.

DID YOU KNOW?

The LA Galaxy are the winning-est team in MLS, having won the coveted MLS Cup five times after taking the title over the New England Revolution last season. The Galaxy is unmatched in cup wins, the capstone to the project started when a famous Englishman joined this budding soccer league in the U.S. all those years ago.



Founded: 1996
Stadium: StubHub Center
MLS Titles: 5
Best Season Finish: 1st - 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2009, 2010 2011



LOS ANGELES GALAXY

Nickname: Los Galacticos // **Ultras:** The Angel City Brigade, The LA Riot Squad, Galaxians



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The MLS Cup champions enter the 2015 season feeling rather confident, and they should – the LA Galaxy retains a healthy core of players that have now won numerous championships. This season, the Galaxy will look quite different though, with Landon Donovan retiring at the end of 2014 and Robbie Keane entering what could be his final season with the Galaxy. But, no need to fear, as the LA Galaxy added another big name to its ranks over from England, and remain the heavy favourites in the Western Conference. So, the question is, can the LA Galaxy repeat and win the MLS Cup again?



ONE TO WATCH: GYASI ZARDES

The LA Galaxy feature a number of young stars but it is the emergence of Gyasi Zardes that will capture the most attention once more in 2015. Zardes came from out of seemingly nowhere and established himself as a starter on this championship winning team, and his distinct hairstyle makes him hard to miss!



THE COACH: BRUCE ARENA

Bruce Arena has seen it all and done it all in Major League Soccer, and he'll look to keep on repeating his accomplishments in 2015. Arena is one of the best coaches in MLS but he'll have his eyes on a bigger prize this year as MLS clubs continue searching for a first ever CONCACAF Champions League title.



STAR MAN: STEVEN GERRARD

Robbie Keane and Omar Gonzalez are familiar faces to the LA Galaxy faithful but it's Liverpool icon Steven Gerrard that completes this facelift for the reigning champs. Gerrard is a class act and one of the finest midfielders in the world. He joins the LA Galaxy this summer, following in the footsteps of David Beckham.

"THE GALAXY ARE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CLUB IN MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER HISTORY AND I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO COMPETING FOR MORE CHAMPIONSHIPS IN THE YEARS TO COME."

– Steven Gerrard, on joining the LA Galaxy.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/16 at Hammarby IF
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 at San Jose Earthquakes
Season Opener: 3/6 vs Chicago Fire
Home Opener: 3/6 vs Chicago Fire
Final Game: 10/25 at Sporting Kansas City



MLS WEST: **PORTLAND TIMBERS**

PORTLAND TIMBERS



Founded: 2009
Stadium: Providence Park
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2013

Nicknames: The Timbers // Ultras: Timbers Army



THE COACH: CALEB PORTER

Head coach Caleb Porter enters his third season at the helm of the Portland Timbers, taking the job after his stint as the coach of the U.S. U-23 men's national team. In his first year, he won the MLS Coach of the Year award, too, at the ripe old age of 37.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The Portland Timbers will be hoping that the 2015 season starts off better than the last, when this side picked up just five points in the first eight games of the year. With a rejuvenated roster and much better team chemistry, this Portland side promises to start off stronger, but questions still remain as to the longevity of this team. Consistency has eluded the side since their impressive debut season and while the Timbers have a talented group of players, finding a way to win regularly will be the biggest challenge for the Portland Timbers in 2015.



ONE TO WATCH: NICK BESLER

The Portland Timbers drafted Nick Besler fifth overall from the University of Notre Dame this offseason, and if this defensive midfielder is anything like his older brother, he'll be a star in this league soon enough. Nick is the younger brother of Sporting KC and U.S. international Matt Besler!

"FOR ME NOW IN YEAR THREE, [I HAVE] A LOT MORE KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM AFTER YEAR TWO. THAT DOESN'T MEAN I WON'T TRY NEW THINGS, THAT'S A PART OF COACHING, BUT YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW THIS LEAGUE AND WHAT WORKS. I FEEL LIKE, ABOVE ALL ELSE, NOW GOING INTO YEAR THREE, I HAVE A MUCH BETTER SENSE OF WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T WORK."

- head coach Caleb Porter.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 1/31 vs Sporting Kansas City
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 vs Stabaek
Season Opener: 3/7 vs Real Salt Lake
Home Opener: 3/7 vs Real Salt Lake
Final Game: 10/25 vs Colorado

BY THE NUMBERS

PORTLAND TIMBERS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 6th

League: 11th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

West: 1st

League: 3rd

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2012

West: 8th

League: 17th

Playoffs: DNQ

2011

West: 6th

League: 12th

Playoffs: DNQ

2010

West: N/A

League: N/A

Playoffs: N/A

All-Time Leading Scorer: Diego Valeri (21)

All-Time Record: 45-44-47

MLS Playoff Appearances: 1



FAN FAVOURITES

Since the Portland Timbers are still relatively a new team in Major League Soccer, there hasn't really been any standout legends of this current iteration of the team just yet: there are a few fan-favourites, though, including Canadian international Will Johnson and English defender Liam Ridgeway.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Portland Timbers' supporters group, the Timbers Army, have a special tradition when one of their own scores a goal: a lumberjack wielding a real chainsaw slices off a slab of a massive tree log live in the stadium as a memento for each goal scored during the season.



BY THE NUMBERS

REAL SALT LAKE LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 3rd

League: 4th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2013

West: 2nd

League: 4th

Playoffs: LOST MLS CUP

2012

West: 2nd

League: 4th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2011

West: 3rd

League: 3rd

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2010

West: 2nd

League: 2nd

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer: Álvaro Saborío (60)
All-Time Record: 119-116-84
MLS Playoff Appearances: 7



CLUB LEGEND: KYLE BECKERMAN

Another long-time RSL regular has become an icon for both club and country: U.S. international Kyle Beckerman is famous for his signature dreadlocks and his hard-tackling style of play makes him a menace to the opposition as well. This RSL captain will hold a special place in fans' hearts for years to come.

DID YOU KNOW?

Real Salt Lake came close to winning the 2011 CONCACAF Champions League, after a long path that saw the team triumph over Cruz Azul, Toronto FC, Arabe Unido, the Columbus Crew and Deportivo Saprissa. RSL faced Mexican outfit Monterrey in the final but lost 3-2 in the end.



Founded: 2005
 Stadium: Rio Tinto Stadium
 MLS Titles: 1
 Best Season Finish: 2nd - 2010, 2012, 2013



Nickname: Royals // Ultras: The Loyalists, Rouge Cavaliers Brigade, Salt City United

MLS WEST: REAL SALT LAKE



REALSALT LAKE



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Real Salt Lake is changing. The 2009 MLS Cup winners have remained a force to be reckoned with in the years since but after falling short in the MLS playoffs last year, Real Salt Lake has made a number of big moves, trading away veterans of the team in exchange for younger prospects. Nat Borchers, Ned Grabavoy, Robbie Findley and Chris Wingert are gone, Joao Plata is out for months with injury and unless RSL can find replacements quickly, this team might just struggle in the early part of the 2015 season.



ONE TO WATCH: LUIS GIL

It's hard to believe that Luis Gil is still only 21 years old and yet this RSL mainstay now enters his fifth season with the club. He now has a U.S. national team cap under his belt too and while Gil hasn't really established himself as a starter at RSL, this season promises to be an important one for this talented star.



THE COACH: JEFF CASSAR

Real Salt Lake is a team very much built by the hands of current NYCFC head coach Jason Kreis and his assistant, Jeff Cassar. Kreis has now departed RSL but Cassar was promoted to head coach, keeping with him an established system and process both on and off the field.



STAR MAN: JAVIER MORALES

Since 2007, Javier Morales has been the star man at Real Salt Lake and that's not going to change in 2015. Morales is a creative attacking midfielder from Argentina with vision and has scored 37 times and provided 65 assists in 185 appearances. He is Real Salt Lake's most important offensive player.

"YOU JUST LOOK AT OUR ROSTER, IT'S EVOLVING. IF YOU HAVE A LOT OF MIDFIELDERS, YOU PLAY A MIDFIELD FORMATION. I THINK WE HAVE A FEW LESS MIDFIELDERS THIS YEAR, A FEW MORE FORWARDS, WE'VE ADDED SOME SPEED IN THE BACK, SO I THINK, YOU KNOW, THE ROSTER'S EVOLVING." - Head coach Jeff Cassar.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: N/A
 Final Pre-Season Game: N/A
 Season Opener: 3/7 at Portland
 Home Opener: 3/14 vs Philadelphia
 Final Game: 10/25 at Seattle



MLS WEST: **SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES**

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES



Founded: 1996
Stadium: Avaya Stadium
MLS Titles: 2
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2003, 2005, 2012

Nicknames: Quakes, Goonies // **Ultras:** 1906 Ultras, Club Quake, Soccer Silicon Valley



THE COACH: DOMINIC KINNEAR

Former Houston Dynamo manager Dominic Kinnear has taken over as the head coach of the San Jose Earthquakes, ending a nine-year term with the Texan club. But, San Jose isn't unfamiliar territory for Kinnear, who was the head coach of the side from 2004-2005 and was also a player for the club in 1997.



STAR MAN: CHRIS WONDOLOWSKI

There's one big star player at San Jose. He's the club captain, a Designated Player, and also holds the joint record for most goals scored in a single season at 27: it's U.S. international forward Chris Wondolowski, who will look to find his form once again this season with the Quakes.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The problem with the San Jose Earthquakes isn't that the club necessarily has a bad team on the field: they don't. No, the problem for the Quakes this season is that the gap between good teams and great teams has increased by so much this season, especially in the West, that a good team like San Jose might not be good enough in the end. This season is going to be a real test for the Quakes, who are taking on teams stacked with Designated Players and star-studded line-ups. Sneaking into a final playoff spot might be the best outcome for this team.



ONE TO WATCH: INNOCENT EMEGHARA

San Jose signed another Designated Player, Swiss forward Innocent Emeghara. He's a full Swiss international, and, at 25, is a long-term partner up top for Wondo, and yes, there are so many new DPs to keep an eye out for but how many of them have a first name like Innocent?

"EVERY TEAM IS A PLAYOFF CALIBRE TEAM. THERE ARE NO EASY GAMES. WE'LL NEED SOME LUCK, AND WE'LL NEED TO BE HEALTHY."

— head coach Dominic Kinnear.

"GOONIES NEVER SAY DIE!"

— Steven Lenhart



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/4 vs Houston
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 vs Los Angeles
Season Opener: 3/7 at FC Dallas
Home Opener: 3/22 vs Chicago
Final Game: 10/25 at FC Dallas

BY THE NUMBERS

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 9th

League: 18th

Playoffs: DNQ

2013

West: 6th

League: 10th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

West: 1st

League: 1st

Playoffs: QUARTER FINALS

2011

West: 7th

League: 14th

Playoffs: DNQ

2010

West: 6th

League: 8th

Playoffs: SEMI FINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer: Chris Wondolowski (80)

All-Time Record: 209-207-116

MLS Playoff Appearances: 8

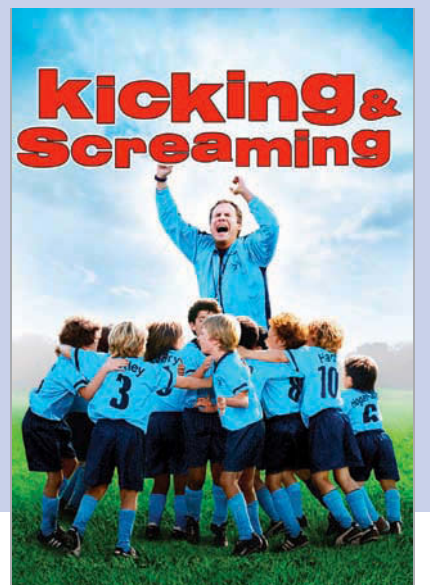


CLUB LEGENDS: LANDON DONOVAN / DWAYNE DE ROSARIO & ALAN GORDON / STEVEN LENHART

San Jose's is a story of two different MLS teams, after the club went on hiatus during the 2006 and 2007 seasons. Before, legends included Landon Donovan and Dwayne De Rosario (pictured) and after, it was all about the Bash Brothers: Alan Gordon and Steven Lenhart.

DID YOU KNOW?

Wondolowski isn't the only star man at the San Jose Earthquakes: last year's ninth overall draft pick, J.J. Koval, is a bit of a celebrity, too. Before this Stanford midfielder turned pro, he was a player in Will Ferrell's 2005 soccer comedy, *Kicking and Screaming*, playing for the Gladiators!



BY THE NUMBERS

SEATTLE SOUNDERS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 1st

League: 1st

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2013

West: 4th

League: 6th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2012

West: 3rd

League: 7th

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2011

West: 2nd

League: 2nd

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2010

West: 4th

League: 6th

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

All-Time Leading Scorer: Fredy Montero (47)

All-Time Record: 94-54-48

MLS Playoff Appearances: 6



CLUB LEGEND: DEANDRE YEDLIN

Unlike some club legends who are mostly veterans with storied careers, the Seattle Sounders have a young homegrown star who has made it to the top level. DeAndre Yedlin, a local Seattle defender, joined the club in 2013 and made the switch to the Premier League just two years later, joining Tottenham Hotspur.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Seattle Sounders have a long-standing rivalry with another MLS club, the Portland Timbers, who, along with the Vancouver Whitecaps, make up the Cascadia Cup competition, one that started in the NASL. The Cascadia Cup is considered the hottest rivalry in MLS and each year, these three sides battle it out for supremacy in the Northwest.



Founded: 2009
Stadium: CenturyLink Field
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 1st - 2014



MLS WEST: SEATTLE SOUNDERS



SEATTLE SOUNDERS

Nickname: Rave Green // **Ultras:** Emerald City Supporters



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Being a Seattle Sounders fan is a bit like being an Arsenal fan: the team plays some entertaining, beautiful football consistently, picks up points regularly, finishes near the top of the standings almost every year, and, despite the promise of glory, the team ultimately comes up short when it counts the most. Seattle (and Arsenal) has picked up some silverware as of late but not the big prize: the league title. This team should be firing on all cylinders come the start of the 2015 season though and are favourites in the Western conference, as always.



ONE TO WATCH: CRISTIAN ROLDAN

There are many up-and-coming stars in Seattle but one player worth keeping an eye out for is Cristian Roldan, picked up by the Sounders late in the first round of this year's SuperDraft. Roldan was projected to go in the top three but he is a very specific type of attacking midfielder. Seattle might have gotten a steal here!



THE COACH: SIGI SCHMID

One of the finest minds in MLS, Sigi Schmid returns as head coach of the Seattle Sounders with one mission in mind: win the MLS Cup. Schmid has built the Sounders from the ground up into one of the best teams in the league. This season, Schmid will be looking to legitimize his model franchise with a championship.



STAR MEN: OBAFEMI MARTINS & CLINT DEMPSEY

There are two stars in Seattle, both of whom feed off each other, score goals and provide assists at a regular pace: Nigerian forward Obafemi Martins and U.S. striker Clint Dempsey are the leading men and the two have created a killer combination on the attacking end for the Sounders.

"WE'D CERTAINLY LIKE TO GET THAT GORILLA OFF OUR BACK. IT'S A CUP COMPETITION. WE'RE REALLY, REALLY CLOSE BUT IT'S A CUP SO A LITTLE BIT OF LUCK IS SPATTERED INTO THAT AND WE JUST NEED THAT LITTLE BIT OF GOOD FORTUNE ALONG WITH THAT GOOD PLAY."

– Sigi Schmid.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/4 vs UCLA
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/25 Team TBD
Season Opener: 3/8 vs New England
Home Opener: 3/8 vs New England
Final Game: 10/25 vs Real Salt Lake



MLS WEST: **SPORTING KANSAS CITY**

SPORTING KANSAS CITY



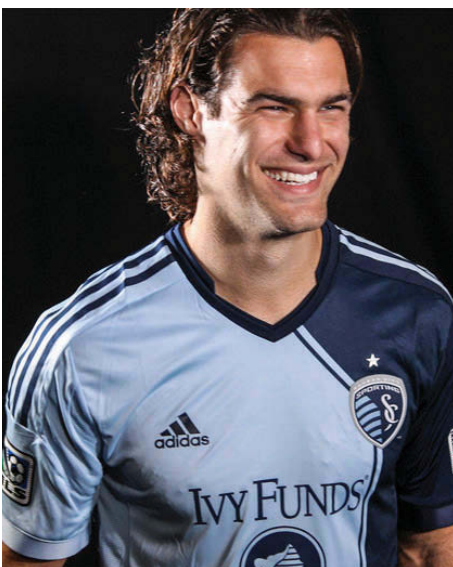
Founded: 1996
Stadium: Sporting Park
MLS Titles: 2
Best Season Finish: 1st - 1997, 2000, 2004, 2011, 2012

Nicknames: SKC, The Wiz // **Ultras:** The Cauldron (La Barra KC, Brookside Elite, Mass Street Mob, etc.)



THE COACH: PETER VERMES

Peter Vermes has built something of a model franchise in Kansas City and the credit is his alone to revel in. Sporting KC was crowned MLS Cup champions in 2013 and the team remains a huge threat in MLS. The playing style Vermes implemented has bore fruit time and time again.



STAR MAN: GRAHAM ZUSI

U.S. international Graham Zusi is the star man at Sporting Kansas City, and nowhere could be better, as the young attacking midfielder made his name and his fame at the club he still calls home. Zusi was made a Designated Player as a result of his meteoric rise to the top, too.

THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

Once considered the kings of the East, Sporting Kansas City will be competing on a new playing field in 2015 after being moved over to the Western Conference this season. The challenge couldn't be made any more difficult as the conference only got tougher but Sporting KC is a team with a game plan. This methodical, thought out side chips away at opposition and while those opponents got a little tougher this season, Kansas City has proven itself a capable unit; it's that team-first mentality that SKC fans will be hoping prevails in their new home out west.



ONE TO WATCH: ERIK PALMER-BROWN

There is a young prospect in Sporting Kansas City who, at only 17 years old, has already signed with the first team: defender Erik Palmer-Brown is the club's first homegrown player signing and has gone through the youth ranks for the U.S. men's national team. He is certainly one to watch as he develops.

"IT'S ONE THING IF YOU CAN WIN SOME GAMES. THE OTHER IS THAT YOU PLAY A VERY ATTRACTIVE STYLE OF SOCCER, AND IT'S ENTERTAINING. WE KEEP THAT AS A CENTREPIECE TO WHO WE ARE. AND SO WE WANT TO ENHANCE THAT ENTERTAINMENT VALUE, WITH STILL BEING ABLE TO ACHIEVE RESULTS." - Head Coach Peter Vermes.



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 1/31 at Portland
Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 vs Minnesota United
Season Opener: 3/8 vs New York
Home Opener: 3/8 vs New York
Final Game: 10/25 vs LA Galaxy

BY THE NUMBERS

SPORTING KANSAS CITY LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

East: 5th

League: 10th

Playoffs: KNOCKOUT ROUND

2013

East: 2nd

League: 2nd

Playoffs: WON

2012

East: 1st

League: 2nd

Playoffs: QUARTERFINALS

2011

East: 1st

League: 5th

Playoffs: SEMIFINALS

2010

East: 3rd

League: 9th

Playoffs: DNQ

All-Time Leading Scorer: Preki (71)

All-Time Record: 235-221-120

MLS Playoff Appearances: 13

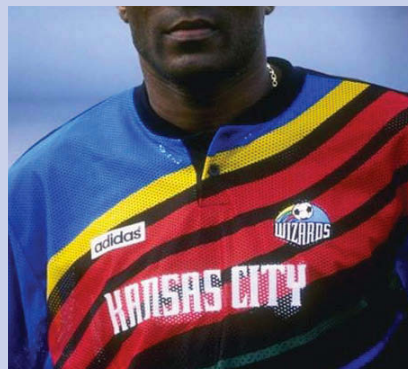


CLUB LEGENDS: PREKI

There have been many great players in Kansas City but chief among them is current Sacramento Republic head coach Preki. This Serbian winger has the most goals (71) and most assists (98) in club history and was the MLS MVP winner in 1997 and in 2003 as well.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sporting Kansas City may share a similar name to some of Europe's top clubs, but this name only came around in 2011. Before that, this team went by a very different name: the Kansas City Wizards. A complete rebrand four years ago saw the birth of this new club and with it, a championship-winning legacy started.



BY THE NUMBERS

VANCOUVER WHITECAPS LAST FIVE YEARS:

2014

West: 5th

League: 9th

Playoffs: KNOCKOUT ROUND

2013

West: 7th

League: 13th

Playoffs: DNQ

2012

West: 5th

League: 11th

Playoffs: KNOCKOUT ROUND

2011

West: 9th

League: 18th

Playoffs: DNQ

2010

West: N/A

League: N/A

Playoffs: N/A

All-Time Leading Scorer: Camilo (39)

All-Time Record: 42-51-43

MLS Playoff Appearances: 2



CLUB LEGEND: MARTIN NASH

Currently the assistant coach at the Ottawa Fury, Martin Nash is considered a hero for the Whitecaps during their years in the NASL, prior to the jump up to MLS. Nash played with Vancouver from 2004-2010 and retired just before the Caps took a step up to MLS.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Vancouver Whitecaps are partly owned by Canadian NBA legend Steve Nash, a connection forged not only for his love of the beautiful game, but of a familial tie to the organization. See, Steve Nash has a younger brother who is a bit of a legend himself in Vancouver...



Founded: 2011
Stadium: BC Place
MLS Titles: 0
Best Season Finish: 5th - 2012, 2014



VANCOUVER WHITECAPS

Nickname: The 'Caps // Ultras: The Southsiders



THE CAMPAIGN AHEAD

The Vancouver Whitecaps may be just one of three Canadian teams in Major League Soccer but this season, they face a much more difficult campaign than the club's cousins out east. See, the Whitecaps occupy a spot in the Western Conference, one made infinitely more difficult with the re-allocation of Sporting Kansas City and the Houston Dynamo. With those two teams added to the West, the Whitecaps will need to work overtime to ensure a spot in the MLS postseason in 2015. The team is already a fringe playoff contender but signs look positive for Vancouver, who might just be a surprise contender this season.



ONE TO WATCH: OCTAVIO RIVERO

The Whitecaps were in desperate need for a leading striker up top and Robinson filled that need with the signing of a third Designated Player in Uruguayan forward Octavio Rivero. At only 23, Rivero offers Vancouver a long-term prospect from which to build around and his height is an advantage up top, too.



THE COACH: CARL ROBINSON

Head coach Carl Robinson lead Vancouver to a playoff berth last season and has also seen the Whitecaps go from underdogs to competitors in a tough Western Conference. With MLS experience under his belt as a player, Robinson's classy demeanour makes him a well-loved fan-favourite for the Vancouver faithful.



STAR MAN: PEDRO MORALES

There are a number of leading characters in Vancouver but this current squad largely revolves around Chilean attacking midfielder Pedro Morales. Signed as a DP last season, Morales' quick feet, vision and passing acumen made him the central figure in the Whitecaps' starting XI and his attacking flair is fun to watch!

"WE WEREN'T THE BEST TEAM LAST YEAR. BUT WE WERE FUN TO WATCH, WE REACHED THE PLAYOFFS, AND THEY GAVE ME EVERYTHING THEY COULD. THAT WAS A SUCCESSFUL SEASON. AS LONG AS KEEP MOVING FORWARD, WE'LL EVENTUALLY GET THERE."

- head coach Carl Robinson on Vancouver's hopes for 2015



2015 MLS SEASON



Pre-Season Opener: 2/4 at New England

Final Pre-Season Game: 2/28 at Chicago

Season Opener: 3/7 vs Toronto FC

Home Opener: 3/7 vs Toronto FC

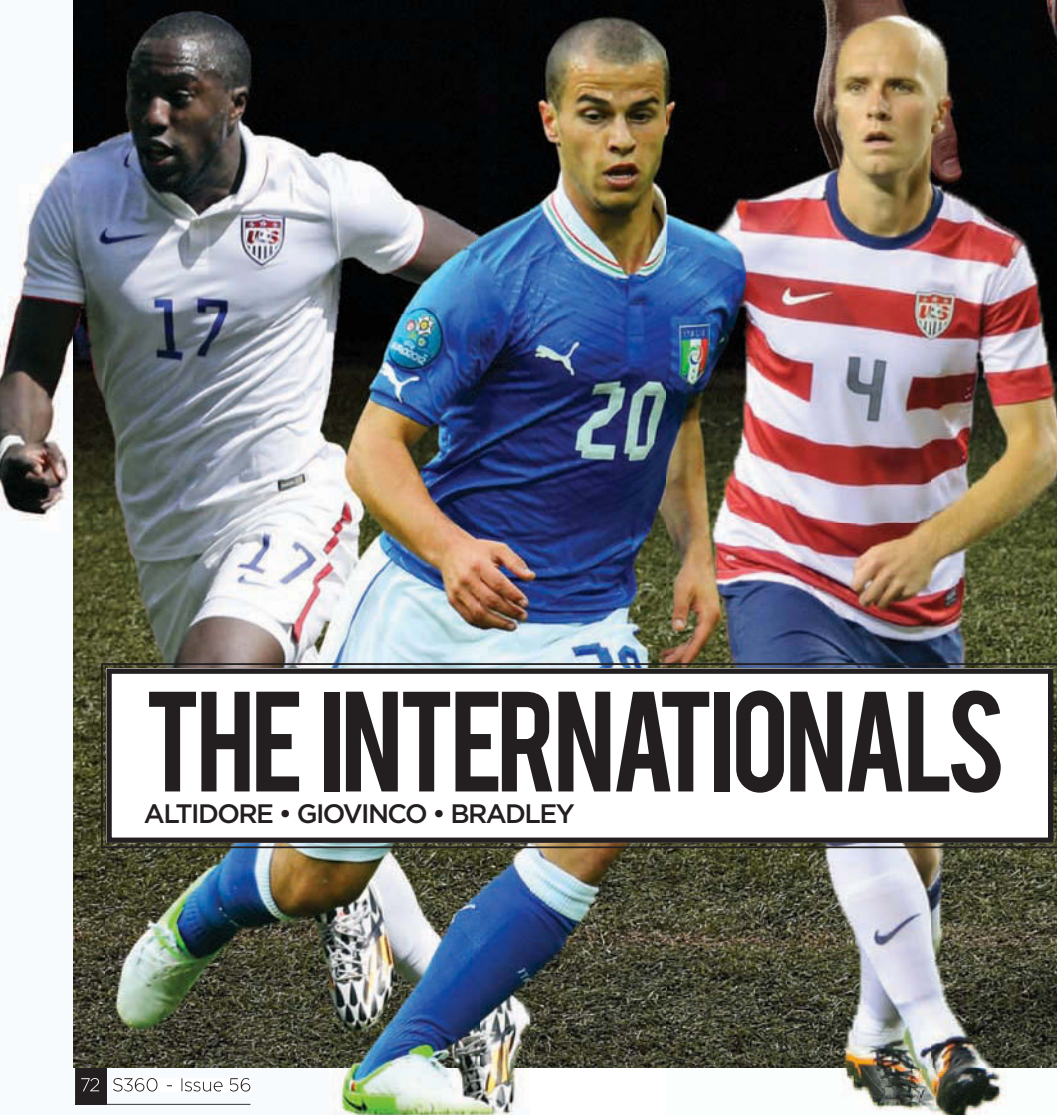
Final Game: 10/25 vs Houston



FROM TORINO TO TORONTO

By: Scott Ferguson

Sebastian giovinco is as big a signing as major league soccer has seen. The likes of david beckham and thierry henry have lit up our shores in recent years, but until now a top european-based talent hasn't joined the league at their prime - and at 28, the best is yet to come from giovinco. After falling out of favour with new management at juventus, giovinco needed to find a new challenge at a club that needed him - and toronto fit the bill for what could be a big turnaround season for tfc. Seba joins michael bradley and jozy altidore as "designated players" he'll look to make a big impact anywhere in attack, slotted in behind altidore or orchestrating the play with his italian speaking partner bradley.



THE INTERNATIONALS

ALTIDORE • GIOVINCO • BRADLEY

TEN TO KNOW

10. With a five month early arrival, Toronto and local Juventus fans met a genuinely impressed Giovinco at Pearson airport, where he touched down in early February after managing to cut short his contract with the Italian giants

9. Toronto coach Greg Vanney has acknowledged the "special" quality of his new playmaker, who has the potential to play at a level above most of MLS. "His vision around the field to bring other people into the game is special," Vanney told reporters shortly after Giovinco joined his team's preseason.

8. Giovinco maintains that he didn't move to MLS to retire - he insists that he came to Toronto to win trophies. "I came here to win, and to leave an important mark on this particular team and on this particular league," he told a translator after touching down in the GTA.

7. He helped get Roberto di Matteo fired at Chelsea - Giovinco, then 25, scored in Juventus' 3-0 win over the defending Champions League winners in 2012. Chelsea manager Di Matteo got his pink slip later that day.

6. Giovinco has his sights set on Euro 2016 with Italy - and why shouldn't he? Azzurri coach Antonio Conte is familiar with the diminutive midfielder from his time at Juventus and last called him up for a friendly in November. So far, Conte has only made positive noises about Giovinco's move to North America.

5. He has two Scudetti league titles - despite falling out of favour at Juventus this season, Giovinco can point to his two Serie A crowns as evidence of time well spent in Turin. His spell with Juve also gave him two Italian Super Cup medals.

4. He really is the Atomic Ant - at just 5'5" or 1.64 m, Giovinco is one of the smallest players in professional football. For reference, Lionel Messi is 5'3", while Chelsea goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois towers over a foot higher than both at 6'6".

3. Giovinco was highly rated from day one, having won the 2008 Toulon Tournament with Italy's under-21 side and being named the tournament's most valuable player. He missed out on his country's 2006 World Cup triumph as he was just breaking into Juventus' first team at the time.

2. Sebastian has a brother, Giuseppe Giovinco, who plays with lower-division side Pisa and was even linked to Toronto in the days following his older sibling's arrival. The move, which would have been to help Sebastian settle in, looks unlikely given MLS' strict roster requirements - which may not be such a bad thing, given that the highest point in Giuseppe's career thus far has been the Italian Serie C.

1. He's had his ups and downs - Giovinco's career has been stop-start at times. He didn't make his Italian senior team debut until 2011, nearly two years after he finished with the country's under-21s, and he quickly became an Azzurri regular before a downturn in from saw him miss the World Cup last year. Toronto fans will be hoping his stats hit an upward trend now that he's on this side of the pond.



"IN ITALY, I HAD MANY PROBLEMS. THEY WERE ALL TALKING ABOUT ME AS A PLAYER WHO COULDN'T PLAY AT A HIGH LEVEL, BUT I ALWAYS DEMONSTRATED WITH FACTS THAT WAS NOT CORRECT. I WANTED TO FIND A CITY, A TEAM, THAT FROM THE BEGINNING WELCOMED ME."

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DIEGO FORLAN? WE'LL PASS

No thank you, said the Colorado Rapids, when Uruguayan forward Diego Forlan came-a-knockin'! Five years ago, Forlan would certainly have been a dream signing but nowadays, it seems even teams like Colorado aren't interested – what a shame!



HE SAID WHAT?!

There's a war of words between Montreal Impact owner Joey Saputo and Toronto FC president Tim Leiweke after Saputo lamented Toronto FC's spending habits this offseason. In response, Leiweke took a dig at Saputo, saying, "he's made a lot of money off cheese," and added, "I think we have better young players than Montreal. A better academy and a better focus on what our staff is trying to do with the young kids."



THE ULTIMATE PRIZE

Well, it finally happened, folks. After years of hearing sports fans in the U.S. blast soccer, a professional soccer team has finally won the Super Bowl! Such was the headline in England, anyway, who wrote of the New England Revolution's triumph over the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLIX. Poor Patriots!

Tom Brady celebrates with wife Gisele Bundchen after being named MVP in New England Revolution's Super Bowl win over Seattle Seahawks

By BEN NAGLE FOR MAILONLINE

PUBLISHED: 06:08 EST, 2 February 2015 | UPDATED: 06:08 EST, 2 February 2015

Tom Brady celebrated with his wife Gisele Bundchen after a memorable night saw him help New England Revolution to Super Bowl XLIX victory, pick up his third career 'Most Valuable Player' award, and break Joe Montana's record of 11 Super Bowl touchdowns.

In an enthralling match at the University of Phoenix Stadium, New England Revolution beat Seattle Seahawks 26-24, with Brady on top form to help his side win their fourth Super Bowl title.

BURNING BRIGHTER

The Chicago Fire announced the signing of a new Designated Player, picking up Wigan Athletic midfielder Shaun Maloney. This Scottish international will bring with him tenacity and drive in the attacking end, something Chicago struggled with last season.



CANADIANS IN TEXAS

Impressed with Canadian-born Rookie of the Year Tesho Akindele, FC Dallas added another dash of Canadian quality to its roster, trading for Toronto native Kyle Bekker. The Canadian international midfielder got a rough start in Dallas: his first game saw him nutmegged by Kaká in a friendly and the video went viral.

ANYTHING YOU CAN DO

Not to be outdone by FC Dallas, the Philadelphia Union also added some Canadian talent of their very own, bringing in Steven Vitoria on loan from SL Benfica in the Portuguese first division.



SEE YA LATER, MATE

The New York Red Bulls have parted ways with Designated Player Tim Cahill, who has terminated his contract in order to join Chinese outfit Shanghai Greenland Shenhua. Cahill's departure now leaves the Red Bulls looking for replacements in the middle of the park.



DEALING WITH HUSTON HEAT

Zach Steinberger, drafted eighth overall by the Houston Dynamo, has a unique plan for preseason training. In order to prepare for his first professional year, this California native has undertaken hot yoga classes to keep fit and get adjusted to the heat in Houston. Smartly done, lad!



"THE UNDERSTANDING IN EUROPE IS THAT MLS IS AN IMPORTANT PROJECT THAT THEY ALL WANT TO BE A PART OF."

Giovino's agent Andrea D'Amico thinks Major League Soccer is on the up

"MY WISH IS THAT THE DOMESTIC LEAGUE HERE, THE MLS, IS GOING TO AN 11-MONTH SEASON LIKE THE REST OF THE WORLD. JUST EXTENDING THAT SEASON OF MLS WOULD SOLVE [THE FITNESS] ISSUE THAT I HAVE RIGHT NOW BUT WE'RE WORKING ON IT"

US coach Jürgen Klinsmann has clearly never seen a Toronto winter



DELIGHTFULLY HAPPY

On the back of a recommendation from Irish captain Robbie Keane, The La Galaxy took spring training to a whole new level with a trip to Dublin's Gannon Park as well as playing friendly games against Hammarby and Shamrock Rovers. The decision to visit Ireland - has proved to be a wise one as Arena declared himself happy with how it went and how it helped his squad to improve their fitness levels for the season ahead.

CAPPING OFF THE CAPS

The Vancouver Whitecaps have finally found their striker to lead the attacking frontline. After searching for nearly a year, Vancouver added the services of Octavio Rivero as its latest Designated Player. At 23 years old, this Uruguayan striker has plenty of time to establish himself in Vancouver, too.



TYING THE KNOT

Sporting Kansas City forward Dom Dwyer and U.S. women's national team star Sydney Leroux made a special announcement on Valentine's Day - the two were secretly married in January! Do we have the makings of the next big celebrity soccer power couple in Kansas City? You bet!



BENVENUTO, SEBA!

The departure of Jermain Defoe could have easily been a blow that Toronto FC could not recover from, but that's just not good enough for the Reds, who went out and signed an even bigger player in 28-year-old Italian international Sebastian Giovinco! The former Juventus man was mobbed at Toronto's airport upon his arrival and instantly became the favourite son of the city's large Italian population, too.

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NO FUN ALLOWED

Yankee Stadium is the home for New York City FC for the foreseeable future until a stadium is built elsewhere. That being said, stadium officials laid down some ground rules for soccer fans, and they aren't pretty: no flags, no big banners, no fun! These rules, of course, drew the ire of New York City FC's budding fanbase.



BILLBOARD BOMBARDMENT

What exactly is the San Jose Earthquake's marketing department up to? There have been a number of strange billboards popping up in cities with MLS teams advertising San Jose. They are inscribed with "X miles to the epicentre of soccer" and feature the distance between the two cities. What a strange ad campaign!



TRAILBLAZER FROM LA

The LA Galaxy travelled to the White House for a visit with U.S. President Barack, who hailed LA Galaxy defender Robbie Rogers, the first openly gay athlete, saying, "you've inspired a whole lot of folks here and around the world, and we are very proud of you."



EMBRACING ORLANDO

There is something special happening down in Orlando ahead of Orlando City SC's first kick in Major League Soccer. Over 7000 fans showed up for the club's first open training session and over 40,000 tickets have already been sold for the team's home opener against New York City FC.



DISASTER IN SALT LAKE CITY

Real Salt Lake is facing crisis after the team's top scorer, Joao Plata, fractured his fifth metatarsal in his left foot, ruling him out for 3-4 months of play. Plata scored 13 goals last season for RSL and his absence up top will require some immediate reinforcements.



JONES UNDER ARMOUR

USMNT and New England Revolution's Jermaine Jones, is the newest member of the Under Armour family. Jones joins Michael Dawson, Brad Friedel and Lauren Holiday athletes from the world of soccer endorsing the brand.



AN AXE TO GRIND

The Portland Timbers had a bit of fun with their large fanbase before the start of the season, inviting supporters to come down for a photo shoot and handing them massive, tree-cutting axes, chainsaws and other equipment to pose with.

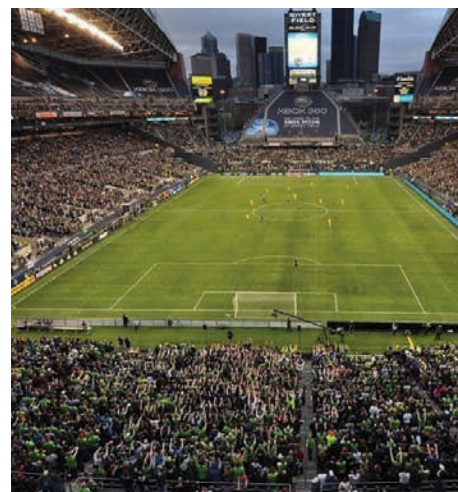


INTER IN THE WHITE HOUSE

D.C. United owner Erick Thohir is a familiar name to followers of Italian football; he's also the owner of Inter Milan. That connection might just bare fruit this season, with Thohir hinting that some Inter players might make their way on loan to D.C. United in 2015.

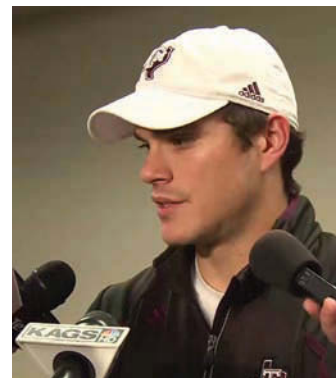
NO NEW DIGS

If Seattle Sounders fans were waiting for a new stadium anytime in the near future, they'll have to keep waiting. The club announced that they have no plans to move out of CenturyLink Field. Not only that, but the field turf that looked so worn out by the end of the season last year won't be getting a replacement, either.



STILL KICKING

Former US youth international goalkeeper, Josh Lambo is hoping to take his football career swap to the professional level. The FC Dallas keeper, who began kicking for the Texas A&M college football team in 2012 after his pro soccer career fizzled is going through the NFL Scouting Combine with hopes of playing in the NFL.



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IN A NEW REGULAR SERIES, SOCCER 360 PUTS THE TACTICAL SIDE OF THE BEAUTIFUL GAME UNDER THE MICROSCOPE



For a Coach who has made reinvention his trademark in recent years, it seems absurd that Carlo Ancelotti was ever considered as tactically inflexible. But wind the clock back 20 years and you'd find a man heavily influenced by the 4-4-2 philosophy of Arrigo Sacchi who had no room in his Parma side for Gianfranco Zola.

"I made a mistake with Zola," the Italian has admitted in later life. "I wanted to play with a 4-4-2, a formation I knew well, but he wanted to be fielded as a striker rather than on the flank. That was my first season as a Coach in Serie A and I was not able to change the system - that was the only way I knew how to play."

Ancelotti was well clued up with the module. It was one which Sacchi introduced to an Italian game which before that had been obsessed with sweepers, man-to-man marking and defensive counter-attacking football. Instead, Sacchi - who Ancelotti played for at Milan and then assisted with the Italian national team - unbolted the Catenaccio door and introduced a zonal game which was more dynamic, quicker and saw players attack space. It was a manner of play which, as Zola's transfer to Chelsea illustrated, put the system above the individual.

Of course, with time, Ancelotti understood that adaptability was key to continual success. In subsequent years at Milan, he successfully employed 4-3-1-2 and 4-3-2-1 formations, as well as opting to permanently transform Andrea Pirlo from an attacking midfielder behind the strikers to a deep-lying playmaker. Carletto has also used a 4-2-3-1, to a lesser extent, and of course a 4-3-3. It's thus curious that less than a season after winning La Decima for Real Madrid, he's decided to go back to basics with two banks of four and two attackers. In fairness to Ancelotti, it's not as undeveloped as the out-dated version which was once the staple diet of modern day football - whether it was played at Old Trafford or some waste ground on a cold Sunday morning between two pub teams fuelled on the previous night's alcohol intake. It's a little bit more versatile, as you would expect when it is constructed with some of the world's most gifted players.

"The best defensive system that exists is the 4-4-2," explains Ancelotti, who also had spells in charge of Juventus, Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain. "Thus my aim for Real Madrid is to defend with a 4-4-2 and attack with a 4-3-3."

Ancelotti opted for such a tactical approach after a summer, which saw him lose Angel Di Maria and Xabi Alonso, was followed by a stuttering start to the season. On paper, the side looks unbalanced given the offensiveness of central midfielders Luka Modric and Toni Kroos, but when you combine their ability with the work ethic of wide players Isco and James Rodriguez, or Gareth Bale, and it can shine as their astonishing 22-game winning streak earlier this season testified.



When out of possession, Real have a four-man midfield which works hard, limits space by staying compact and is highly organised. When in possession, Isco and James Rodriguez provide outlets, as does the roaming Ronaldo who is freed from any kind of defensive duties. Add in the over-lapping full-backs - especially Marcelo - and Ancelotti has managed to turn a system which is often regarded as predictable and rigid into a flexible and unpredictable one. We really shouldn't expect anything less from a man who is today ranked as one of the world's top Coaches. Experience has taught him that you don't have to prioritise when it comes to players and tactics, you have to compromise. And if Zola was still playing today, it would be safe to assume that Ancelotti would find a spot for him in his side...



FORMATIONS OF THE PAST

The 2-3-5, also known as the Pyramid, was the predominant system used across most of the globe between 1890 and 1940. An upside down Christmas Tree, it consisted of one goalkeeper, two full-backs, three midfielders (known as half-backs) and five attackers which contained two wingers. When defending, the two defenders would zonally mark the opponents' three central strikers, while two midfielders would track the wingers.



COACH'S CORNER

WHAT SOME OF THE WORLD'S TOP BOSSES CONSIDER WHEN SETTING UP THEIR TEAMS...

Demolish them

"All I do is look at the footage of our opponents and then try to work out how to demolish them. All I do is study my arsenal of weapons and pick the ones I need for each occasion."

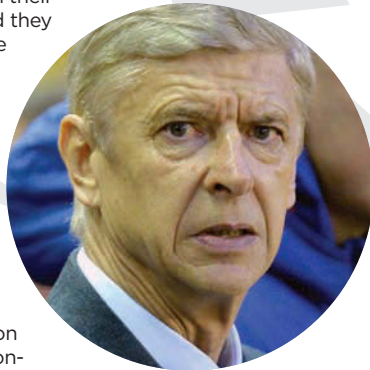
Bayern Munich tactician Pep Guardiola



Position play

"It's important that you have the right players in the right positions. If you have any doubts, then sometimes you can tell where they should be playing by looking at their personality. Once you get everyone playing in the right position then their natural qualities will develop and they will become better players. Once that happens then it is the team as a whole which reaps the benefits."

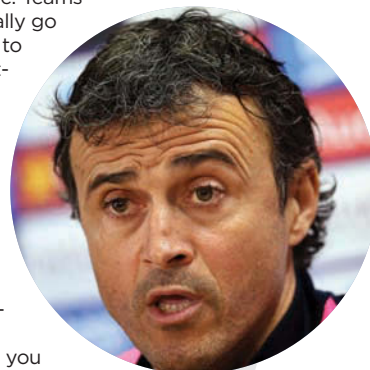
Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger



Intensity, intensity, intensity

"Make sure the team understands the mentality of the pressing game. It has to be done by all eleven players otherwise it doesn't work. The players have to move in formation together. A great Coach must convince his players to believe in his vision and make sure they do. If a player only does it because the boss says so then that's not good enough! The players must believe. Teams that play out from the back usually go from goalkeeper to centre-back to full-back. Chase that down, starting with the player closest to the opponent in possession. To do this for 90 minutes is tiring, but you can't sit back."

Barcelona Coach Luis Enrique



On the counter

"There are three fundamental aspects when it comes to counter-attacking. You don't keep the ball in the middle of the pitch so you use the flanks, you need overlapping players and you need your players to attack the opposition's defence."

Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti



Evolution and not revolution

"I worked on a new system (4-3-1-2) at the start of the season, but I didn't want to overhaul a tried and trusted formation (3-5-2) in a short space of time. So I kept the one they were familiar with, offering adjustments here and there until I felt it was the right time to fully switch."

Juventus boss Massimiliano Allegri



The result counts

"It is more difficult to play football in Italy. Every team is much, much better organised from the tactical point of view. The Champions League results of the last few years show that the top Italian teams were not at the level of the top English teams. But when you go to the championship reality, the small teams in Italy are better than the small teams in England. It's much more difficult for a top team in Italy to win a game than in England because, from the tactical point of view, people are not worried about the quality of the show. People are just worried about the result."

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, formerly of Inter



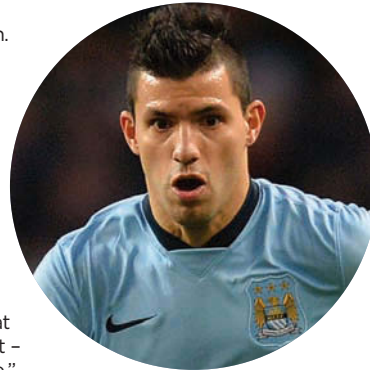
PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

HOW TO TRAIN AND PLAY LIKE A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLER...

Hitting the target

"Shoot hard and true, low or high. And obviously you are looking for the corners too. I aim for just inside the post, usually the one furthest from the goalkeeper. If it's on, take your shot early. This will surprise the keeper and the defenders. The keeper won't have time to set himself and by the time he's realised you're shooting he'll already be on the back foot, scrambling to react. It's not enough to think that all you have to do is hit the target – the modern striker must do more."

Manchester City striker Sergio Aguero



Food and drink

"We eat all the normal stuff that you would expect before a game – chicken, pasta, fish. If it's an early kick-off then you have to eat properly the night before as you can't go overboard with food on the morning of the game. The dressing room also has plenty of stuff like cereal bars in case you want them. I'll also have an energy drink about 40 minutes before a game kicks-off."

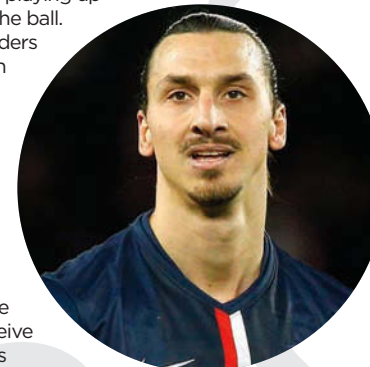
Wayne Rooney of Manchester United



The lone striker

"The most important thing when playing up front on your own is not to lose the ball. If I can protect it and keep defenders behind me with my strength then that allows my team to push up and support me. At that stage I will either pass to my best placed teammate or turn and go for goal myself."

Paris Saint-Germain's Zlatan Ibrahimovic



Thought process

"I'm already thinking about where to pass the ball even before I receive it myself. One important aspect is getting into space because the more space you have the more time you have to think on the ball. The best players are the quickest thinkers."

Barcelona pass master Andres Iniesta



Dead ball alive

"The search for Juninho's free-kick secret had become an obsession for me, to the extent that it occupied my every waking thought. The magic formula was all about how the ball was struck, not where – only three of Juninho's toes came into contact with the leather, not his whole foot as you might expect. In essence, the ball needs to be struck from underneath using your first three toes. You have to keep your foot as straight as possible and then relax it in one fell swoop. That way, the ball doesn't spin in the air, but does drop rapidly towards the goal. That's when it starts to rotate."

Juventus' free-kick expert Andrea Pirlo



Defence minister

"You have to try and outsmart an attacker. Get your body in the way of the ball or them. Obviously you are trying to win the ball, but you need to realise that you can't win every ball. Sometimes you have to stand off them and then wait to make your challenge. Your judgement will improve with experience, so the more you train the more you learn."

Inter defender Nemanja Vidic



TACTICAL TERM: LIBERO

The Libero, or the Sweeper, is a term for a central defender who would sit deep in order to sweep up if his defensive colleagues had been breached. As well as tidying things up, the Libero would be asked to start up play which means they were often more technically gifted than their man-marking colleagues. The greatest in history remain the likes of German legend Franz Beckenbauer, as well as Italian idols Gaetano Scirea and Franco Baresi. The Sweeper basically disappeared with the arrival of the flat back four.



HOW PEP DOES IT...

Bayern Munich boss Pep Guardiola prepares his side before any game with three strategic 15-minute team talks.

• The day before a match he will prep his players on what to expect from their opponent's attacking play, giving precise instructions on how his men will need to line-up defensively.

• On match day, he will get his side to focus on their opponent's set-pieces and even throw-ins. Again, each player is told where to position themselves.

• The pre-match team talk will take place in the team hotel, approximately two hours before kick-off. At that stage, the Spaniard will name his starting XI and dictate how he expects his side to attack.



THE UNIQUENESS OF DIEGO SIMEONE

THE MAN BETWEEN THE WHITE LINES OF A FOOTBALL PITCH, OUTLINED IN A CRISP BLACK SUIT AND RAGING PASSION FOR FOOTBALL. LAUREN MAHARAJ WRITES



"I DON'T WANT PLAYERS WHO WANT TO BE THE MAIN CHARACTERS. IF YOU DON'T GIVE IT YOUR ALL AND I CAN FEEL IT, SOMEONE ELSE WILL TAKE YOUR PLACE"

The Argentinian wizard who has proved to the modern game that a wholesome dose of hard work can overcome financial uplifting. The former central midfielder of Los Rojiblancos on two occasions, one of which is the squad of 1995/1996 who lifted the La Liga title for the last time until he would once again grace the Vicente Calderon as their coach in 2011.

Diego Simeone is the 44-year-old powerhouse who is now the face of Atletico Madrid and has reunited football with its raw beginnings. Simeone dawned into the world of coaching like a possessed ram, ultimately willing to physically break his opponents no matter what it took. This approach has translated successfully on many fronts for the current Atletico side he leads. To understand where his influence became so strong, one must understand how influential he was as a player.

During his professional career, 'Cholo' spent time in the defensive states of Serie A representing Inter Milan and Lazio. Then the Argentine grew into the stylish flare of La Liga under Sevilla and Atletico Madrid. Both countries influential styles of play have intertwined into his current prism of coaching. He is remembered as one of Argentina's most legendary defensive midfielders; his presence of leadership and strength is what made him most alluring. The Buenos Aires native had represented Argenti-

na over 100 times levelling his importance to La Albiceleste onto the same plane as Javier Zanetti.

But what makes Simeone so unique is what he has done to revolutionize Atletico to their current heights. The Argentine's ruthless spirit as a player helped define the terms that Atletico Madrid now imitates in order to dismantle their superior opponents in Real Madrid and Barcelona.

The formula for submission is simple, yet so often overlooked in the modern game; grit and determination.

It comes as no surprise that Simeone's style of play was often referred to as "holding a knife between his teeth". "Cholo" was an integral part of the Los Rojiblancos side that paved the way for his current squad. The interesting part of the Simeone era is that the success found is reflective of his success as a player between 1995-1997. This frame of achievement for Atletico would only return to light once he found his path back to the Vicente Calderon as a coach. The 2013/2014 season was Atletico Madrid's greatest season to date. The club had come into the year fresh off winning the UEFA Europa League, finishing 3rd in La Liga as well as claiming the UEFA Super Cup. Despite a drab start to the season Atletico continued their trial in an upward trajectory, breaking records that the squad Simeone played upon once broke in 1996. It was as if history had set itself out to unravel it's past through the leadership of Simeone. The new Madrid side had embarked upon all the triumphs the side of 1996 initiated. First, Simeone led the club past their prior seasons best in third to winning La Liga with a whopping 90 points. The side broke the clubs long standing record of 87 that was created by the squad of 1996, which Simeone was apart of. Then in April of 2014, Atletico recklessly fought Real Madrid in their first Champions League final since the squad of 1996. Again, the same squad Simeone once played on.

The manager's honours had certainly not gone amiss, as Simeone was awarded La Liga Coach of The Year two seasons in a row. One of which was the 2013/2014 season, despite Carlos Ancelletti winning "La Decima" with Real Madrid. His efforts are longstanding, as Simeone had represented Los Rojiblancos with the jersey on his back and as a luminary. The essence of his blueprint to success is the blue-collar message: hard work. His Madrid side has only proven that their underdog status is a representation and not a dead set consequence. Many clubs in today's age would not be able to achieve even minor successes were it not for their deep-set bank accounts. Yet in a football world that is riddled with rich investors and assets, Simeone will continue to prove that money isn't everything.

TOP Left.

Diego Simeone tries to bring his personal success to Atletico Madrid in this year's La Liga race. Already winning La Liga last year, Diego will try to be repeat champions

Right

Diego had happy times and lots of success during his playing career. He established defensive flare in Serie A.



"CALL ME CRAZY, BUT I WOULD NEVER COACH REAL MADRID... IT WOULD BE FOOLISH"

"WHEN I ARRIVED HERE I SAID THAT WHAT I WANTED WAS FOR OUR OPPONENTS TO ALWAYS BE ANNOYED THAT THEY HAD TO PLAY AGAINST ATLETICO. OUR GAMES HAVE TO BE A CHORE FOR THEM, THEY CAN'T JUST BE ANOTHER FIXTURE. OUR RIVALS HAVE TO SUFFER WHEN THEY PLAY US"



SIMEONE'S SON GIOVANNI

Diego's success seems to be contagious in the case of his son, Giovanni. The 19 year old recently led the U20 Argentina side to a South American Championship, also solidifying top goal scorer with nine goals in nine matches. The River Plate striker be- holds the same qualities of strength as his father. This early success could be the foreshadow for a great career.

Above

Giovanni Simeone has already acquired lots of success in u20 Argentina.

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THE

RIVALRY



OUR NEAREST NEIGHBOUR HAS ALWAYS BEEN OUR FIERCEST OPPONENT BUT RESENTMENT EXPLODED AFTER CANADA'S CONTENTIOUS DEFEAT IN THE 2012 OLYMPIC SEMI-FINAL AT OLD TRAFFORD. LES JONES EXPLAINS WHY AND HOW CANADA WILL SEEK REVENGE

Right.
Canadian
born Sydney
Leroux adds a
new dynamic
to the rivalry.



"If you hate the U.S. team, clap your hands". This adaptation of the standard British soccer chant could well be rallying cry for patriotic Canadian fans in this summer's Women's World Cup.

Canada's nearest neighbour has always been their fiercest opponent but resentment exploded after Canada's contentious defeat in the 2012 Olympic semi-final at Old Trafford. Canada more than matched the US but a surprising (if valid) referee call for time-wasting by Erin McLeod led to a controversial penalty and a US goal and their eventual 4-3 victory. To add to the injustice, the winning goal came in the last 30 seconds of added time, in extra-time.

Canadian outrage wasn't helped by Abby Wambach, that year's FIFA Player of the Year, deliberately trying to influence the referee by counting down the seconds, on her fingers and out loud, when the Canadian 'keeper had possession of the ball.

What was a regional rivalry became, overnight, a national grievance.

With the Women's World Cup just a few months away, Canada has a score to settle and plans to avenge that heartbreaking Olympic loss. Depending where the two teams finish in the group stage they could meet at any stage of the knock-out competition. However, if each wins its group they couldn't meet until the final.

Can Canada win? History says no. Canada can't beat the USA. Canada's very first international, back in 1986, was a 2-0 loss to the US. The first meeting in World Cup qualifying in 1991 was a 5-0 loss. Three years later in the CONCACAF WCQ final it was worse, 6-0. All told, our women's team have played our bogeywoman team to the south 59 times. We have won just twice! We haven't beaten them for 14 years nor in the last 32 meetings where we eked out just 4 ties! Can you detect a pattern?

Canada lost by four or more goals in 17 of those games and in more than half of the games failed to even score. WE HAVE NEVER BEATEN THE U.S. AT HOME over 30 exasperating years and have NEVER emerged victorious in World Cup play or, in fact, in any meaningful game against them.

The U.S. has Canada's number. Will this time be any different?

The Canadian team has a mix of up-and-coming youngsters with some veterans who are probably making their final bow. If John Herdman can get them playing together the team should at least be competent. However scoring could be a problem. Talismatic leader Christine Sinclair

OUR NEAREST NEIGHBOUR HAS ALWAYS BEEN OUR FIERCEST OPPONENT BUT RESENTMENT EXPLODED AFTER CANADA'S CONTENTIOUS DEFEAT IN THE 2012 OLYMPIC SEMI-FINAL AT OLD TRAFFORD.



USA GAMES

08 June 2015
U.S.A. vs. Australia
Winnipeg

12 June 2015
U.S.A. vs. Sweden
Winnipeg

16 June 2015
U.S.A. vs. Nigeria
Vancouver

CANADA GAMES

06 June 2015
Can. vs. China PR
Edmonton

11 June 2015
Can. vs. New Zealand
Edmonton

15 June 2015
Can. vs. Netherland
Montreal

just isn't as prolific as when she was younger and by the time the World Cup concludes she will be aged 32 and perhaps past her best. There are no other certified goalscorers in the squad. Janine Beckie is promising and Tancredi is always an aerial threat but there is undue reliance on Sinclair.

Canada did win the four nation BaoAn Cup in China for the first time in January with three good victories over other world cup-bound teams. And they did so without two of their best mid-fielders Chelsea Stewart (playing club soccer in Japan) and Diana Matheson, the Olympic bronze-medal hero, out with a torn ACL until at least early summer. (The U.S. midfield dynamo Shannon Boxx is also looking to return from an ACL operation) However, this is the World Cup where other nations tend to over-perform and Canada to under-perform. (From the beginning of 2010 to the start of the 2011 World Cup, Canada posted an impressive 23-4-4 record under Carolina Morace, and rose to a best ever 6th in FIFA rankings. Then they finished last at the World Cup scoring one goal and conceding seven.)

And this is reflected in the betting odds offered by UK bookies: Canada is 6th favourite at odds of around 10-1 to win the trophy. The U.S. are 3-1 favourites, followed closely by Germany, and have finished in the top 3 in all six tournaments to date although they have not taken home the trophy since 1999. However the US are not the dominating team they once were. While still formidable at home - winning 14 and tying 1 in 2014 - they are less successful on the road. The USA may be the home of the brave but elsewhere they are much more vulnerable, winning only two out of their last seven games in front of foreign supporters.

The U.S. dominance in WWC CONCACAF qualifying is also a little misleading. Admittedly they comprehensively beat runners-up Costa Rica 6-0 in the final but physique was a dominant influence, the Americans being much taller and stronger than the central Americans. All of the U.S. goals came from high balls. They won't have the same luxury against Germany or Sweden or even Canada. Furthermore, in June's World Cup, not only were the U.S. drawn in the 'Group of Death' but they have to face their former coach Pia Sundhage and her Swedish team in the group stage. Their new English coach Jill Ellis has only a few months to get the best out of the team and to manage the expected conversion from the traditional 4-4-2 to a 4-3-3 formation.

One time Women's World Player of the Year



Alex Morgan's U.S.A. are 3 to 1 favorites to take the trophy.



Abby Wambach turns 35 just days before the tournament commences and with questions about her form and fitness she may not dominate the way she has. Rising star, Sydney Leroux is knocking on the door however and she also adds another dimension to the U.S.-Canada rivalry.

Leroux was born in Surrey B.C., the daughter of an American father, and played for Canadian youth teams including the national U-20 team. She switched allegiance in 2008 partly because she had been inspired by the US team winning the 1999 World Cup when she was just 9 years old and, it is inferred, because she thought she had a better chance of fulfilling her dream of replicating that success, with the US. Leroux was roundly booed by the local Vancouver fans the last time she played for the U.S. Not so for Chelsea Stewart, a players who switching allegiance in the other direction. The former captain of the Canadian U-20 team was born in the same year as Leroux, in Denver, Colorado and also made her national debut in 2008. While raised in BC, her education was in the US and she was in the U.S. national team system. However, signed by the Vancouver Whitecaps, she was quickly offered a spot on the Canadian national team and accepted, no doubt influenced by her father having played for a Canadian national hockey team in 1983.

Should both the US and Canada reach the final, or meet during the knock-out phase, not only will there be a duel between the two teams but the two dual-nationals will also be involved in a personal battle for dominance and victory.

Canada's record against the USA is abysmal but we are overdue for success! It is time for Maple Leaf flag to be flying above the World Cup podium not a star-spangled banner. After all, we are playing in our home and native land and if the defence stands on guard we could be singing O Canada rather than murmuring a disappointed Oh Canada.





CUP WINNERS



The 2015 AFC Asian Cup concluded in dramatic fashion this year with Australia defeating challengers South Korea in the finals, capping off what proved to be an exciting tournament in the east. Here's a recap of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup:

Australia Win at Home

This year's AFC Asian Cup tournament was hosted by Australia in five host cities, and the home team didn't disappoint, defeating South Korea 2-1 at extra time. The game was forced into extra time after Son Heung-min scored in the 91st minute of play but the crowd at Sydney's Stadium Australia wouldn't be disappointed, with James Troisi scoring the game winner at the 105-minute mark. It was his second goal of the tournament, and a goal that gave Australia its first-ever AFC Asian Cup title.

Take a Bow, Tim Cahill

Of course, we can't talk about Australia's triumphs this year without mentioning captain Tim Cahill, who netted three goals in the tournament. It was, however, his first goal against China that left home fans speechless, an incredible overhead bicycle kick beating the Chinese keeper. That goal was most certainly the goal of the tournament!

Golden Boot from Abu Dhabi

United Arab Emirates forward Ali Mabkhout might be getting a few looks from European teams in the summer transfer window if he can keep up his goal scoring form from the AFC Asian Cup. Mabkhout scored five times in the tournament, earning the golden boot at the end for his team's third place effort.

A Decided Day in the Asian Cup

There was another reason why this year's AFC Asian Cup was so exciting to watch: the teams involved achieved 26 consecutive matches without a draw, a new record in any major football tournament. The previous record of 18 consecutive win-loss games occurred during the 1930 FIFA World Cup in Uruguay, so it's been quite a while! And, with this result, Australia now boast a very unique international record: the team has won two major intercontinental titles, having won the AFC Asian Cup as well as the OFC Nations Cup.

FIRST PLACE



Australia

SECOND PLACE



South Korea

THIRD PLACE



United Arab Emirates



The African Cup of Nations that just wrapped up in Equatorial Guinea had everything - drama in the build-up, crowd trouble, big upsets and worthy champions. Soccer 360 looks at the highs and lows of the 2015 tournament...

The event itself seemed in jeopardy when the original hosts Morocco requested a postponement due to Ebola fears, one that was rejected by CAF. The new hosts stepped in and organized the tournament on short notice, also taking Morocco's automatic spot as hosts - a second shot at qualification.

On the field, Equatorial Guinea ended up one of the surprises of the tournament, advancing from Group A over larger neighbors Gabon on the final match-day before squeezing by Tunisia in extra-time in the quarterfinals. Former Real Madrid starlet Javier Balboa was the star for the hosts and finished joint top-scorer with three goals.

It was a tournament full of highlights but also the odd head-scratcher. When Guinea and Mali finished level on all tie-breakers as group D runners-up, it required a drawing of lots - one that Guinea won and that left Mali crying foul. DR Congo's quarterfinal was against their own smaller neighbors in the Republic of Congo, a thrilling match that saw the unfancied Republic go 2-0 up before the DRC scored three late goals to win it.

Ghanaian André Ayew took the award for highest scorer, though, with his two assists proving the difference-maker. Ayew scored against Equatorial Guinea in the semifinals, a match that saw a police helicopter summoned to disperse local fans who were causing problems in the stands. Ghana won 3-0 after play was restarted.

That led to a final against Ivory Coast that marked a dramatic end to the competition. A 0-0 draw resulted in penalties that saw Ghana go 2-0 up in the shootout, almost inevitably a recipe for success. Ivory Coast got back into it, though, and eventually both goalkeepers had to step up in sudden-death. Ghanaian net-minder Brimah Razak saw his effort saved and could barely compose himself to get back between the posts, where opposite number Boubacar Barry coolly finished to win the final and end Ivory Coast's 19-year wait for an African Cup of Nations trophy.

Goalkeepers everywhere will be happy to see one of their own getting such a front-page moment, but it was Barry's teammate Sylvain Gbohouo that won goalkeeper of the tournament. A thigh injury against DR Congo in the semifinals, though, ended his tournament and allowed Barry the chance to shine. Ghana's Christian Atsu was player of the tournament after a series of strong performances. Keep an eye out for the Chelsea man, currently on loan at Everton, in the coming seasons. Wilfried Bony joined new club Manchester City as a champion, scoring two goals along with teammates Gervinho and Max Gradel.

Morocco are still suffering from the fallout of their request to postpone the tournament and are currently barred from the next two editions - although the whereabouts of those cups are currently unknown, with original hosts Libya barred from hosting the 2017 edition due to the ongoing instability in the North African country. At the highest levels of African football, such unpredictability remains the norm.

FIRST PLACE



Ivory Coast

SECOND PLACE



Ghana

THIRD PLACE



DR Congo

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Whether you're training on the pitch, or supporting your favourite teams, Soccer 360 breaks down some unique, new products to spike your interest.

ADIDAS F50 ADIZERO

adidas has come up with something really special with the latest adidas F50 adizero. With a new "There Will Be Haters" mantra, these professional football cleats feature microfiber lining on the inside, translucent studs and a new exterior called "Dragon Scale Dribbletex Technology" - it looks like dragon hide and allows for exceptional control.



NIKE MAGISTRA OBRA SG-PRO

Nike's latest offering for the season is the Magistra Obra SG-Pro, a high sock fit cleat and a skeleton frame on the exterior for improved grip. It features screw-in studs for versatility and comes in neon green with orange and black trim.



PUMA EVOPOWER 1 CESC FG LIMITED EDITION

Cesc Fabregas and Puma have teamed up and released a limited edition offering in the evoPower line, a special blue-and-white branded cleat with lime green bottoms that Fabregas wore for one match: Chelsea vs. Tottenham Hotspur. These limited edition shoes are part collector's item, part professional wear.

NIKE HYPERVENOM NEYMAR LIQUID DIAMOND

Not to be outdone by his former Barcelona teammate, Neymar and Nike released a special edition of the infamous Nike Hypervenom cleat, called Neymar Liquid Diamond. This silver-colored cleat also has a gold tongue and a lime green sole and boasts all the high-end features of Nike's Hypervenom line up.



SELLS VICTOR VALDES ELITE COMPETITION GOALKEEPER GLOVES

Fabregas, Neymar, who's next? Why, Victor Valdes, of course, who has teamed up with Sells to release his own brand of signature goalkeeper gloves. Sells makes some of the finest goalkeeper gloves around and these particular gloves were designed by the former FC Barcelona and current Manchester United shot stopper.



DIADORA DD-NA 2 R ID

The latest in Diadora's indoor footwear line, the DD-NA 2 is one of the best options for indoor soccer. It features a water resistant anti-slip lining, bending points in the forefoot area and a shock-absorbing EVA insole. It comes in a blue-green-red-and-white color with gold trim on the bottom.



UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2015 FINALS MATCH BALL

This year's Champions League final will be in Berlin and the official match ball features a very hip vibe, much like the city. With the traditional Champions League star panel shape, the 2015 finals ball also features colorful neon art and all the tech you'd expect from adidas game balls. the pace!



2015 COPA AMERICA JERSEYS

This year's Copa America is going to be a rather interesting one as there is no fixed venue; as such, there are several stadiums in the United States and Canada who will be playing host to South America's finest. Show your support with Latin flair with the new line of jerseys for this tournament. Whether it's Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia or the U.S., there are plenty of new shirts to choose from.



PK PRO - SNIPER NET

Practice zonal shooting and penalty kicks in style and comfort with the PK Pro - Sniper Net. This netting retrofits to most goal posts and creates a big dead zone in the middle, with various pockets in key penalty zones on the outside rim. It's an excellent tool for developing both penalty and free kick abilities.



ADIDAS MICOACH SMART BALL

There's a new innovation in soccer ball technology courtesy of adidas, who released the miCoach SMART BALL at the top of 2015. This ball features Bluetooth and app-enabled connectivity with an internal sensor that tracks movement, speed, rotation, height, and ball strike locations, among other metrics. It's the perfect ball for training and analytics.



NEW MLS STAR SHIRTS

Major League Soccer has rebranded, with a new logo adorning the two sleeves of all its teams, in colors that match each respective club. There are also plenty of fan favorites joining the league, so whether it's an Orlando City Kaka shirt, a Steven Gerrard LA Galaxy kit, a Sebastian Giovinco TFC top or a David Villa New York jersey, there's something for every MLS fan.



NEW YORK CITY FC FLATBRIM SNAPBACK

Every New Yorker knows the one thing that makes a New York sports fan is a flatbrim Snapback hat. So ahead of New York City FC's first kick in Major League Soccer, a new NYCFC branded Snapback hat is available for purchase online. It comes in a sky blue and navy blue combination. other great clubs.



SKILLS KING PRO

The perfect tool to help improve striking and heading ability, the Skills King Pro is a massive pendulum with a string and a ball that rebounds and keeps coming back at a constant height. It's one of the most effective ways to develop your techniques on the ball. But, coaches, this one is a bit on the higher end for training skills, retailing at just under \$900.00.



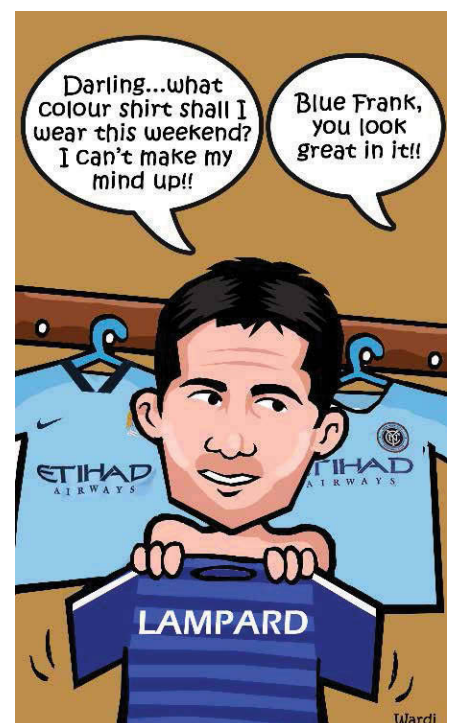
2015 USA AWAY COLLECTION

The United States national team has a new collection for 2015, releasing new men's and women's away shirts; this dark blue themed collection offers a new official away jersey, track suits, shorts, socks, shin guards, balls and other U.S. national team branded gear.



ORLANDO CITY SC BLACK WATCH

Kick off your new fandom with a commemorative black watch from MLSgear.com, featuring the gold lion and purple shield of the newest MLS franchise, Orlando City SC. This water resistant Japanese movement watch comes in a modern single-band style and is the perfect gift for fans of Orlando's new soccer team.



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Right. Cristiano Ronaldo has now won two consecutive Ballon D'or titles.

CRISTIANO RONALDO

By Armen Bedakian

FIFA
BALLON
D'OR
2014



THREE-TIME WORTHY

The votes have been casted, the results, tallied, and now that the dust has settled, the greatest rivalry in world football has been settled for yet another year: Cristiano Ronaldo is the recipient of the 2014 FIFA Ballon d'Or title, beating Lionel Messi for the title for a second successive year and claiming the title of the world's best player.

The Ballon d'Or, otherwise known as the Golden Ball, is an annual award given by FIFA to signify each year's top player, as voted by national team coaches and players, as well

Right. It was his leadership at Real Madrid that allowed him to achieve greatness and win his second Ballon D'or.

as the top football writers from around the world. The current version of the Ballon d'Or is actually a combination of the FIFA World Player of the Year award and the former Ballon d'Or. In recent years, these two awards have been fought over by just two players and after amalgamation in 2010 the current Ballon d'Or title remains a two-player race between Argentine magician Lionel Messi and the Portuguese elite, Cristiano Ronaldo. The latter won the award in 2008, Messi won it four years in a row from 2009-2012, and Ronaldo piped the title once again in 2013 and 2014. Such is the dominance of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi that other generational greats like Andres Iniesta, Xavi, Franck Ribery and Manuel Neuer have only managed to finish in second or third place spots in the last five years. But while the battle for supremacy between Messi and Ronaldo rages on, it is the Portuguese captain who has claimed glory in recent years.

So, how did Ronaldo repeat this feat in 2014? Success in the 2014 UEFA Champions League most certainly helped his cause! Cristiano Ronaldo guided Real Madrid to a historic tenth Champions League title. Those 51 goals in 47 appearances in all competitions for Real Madrid certainly helped. He netted five times in nine international games for Portugal, too. In a year where Messi came close to a World Cup with Argentina, it was Ronaldo's Champions League win that seemed to win over the voters: the Portuguese winger earned 37.66 per cent of the votes. Messi and Neuer came in second and third respectively, though it was close. Messi beat Neuer by a fraction of a percentage (15.76 to the German shot stopper's 15.72 percent).

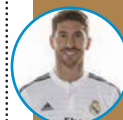
Messi will challenge for the throne in 2015. But for today, Cristiano Ronaldo is the king of football.



FIFA 2014 TEAM OF THE YEAR



Goal Keeper
Neuer



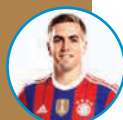
Defender
Ramos



Defender
Luiz



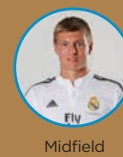
Defender
Silva



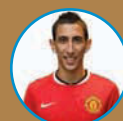
Defender
Lahm



Midfield
Iniesta



Midfield
Kroos



Midfield
Di Maria



Forward
Robben



Forward
Messi



Forward
Ronaldo



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